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OR
THE SPHINX HAS SPOKEN

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FRIENDS AND LOVERS
OR
THE SPHINX HAS SPOKEN
A NOVEL

by

MAURICE DEKOBRA

Author of "The Madonna of the Sleeping Cars"

Translated from
Le Sphinx a Parlé
by Metcalfe Wood



LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

COTTAGE HOUSE, 24 & 26 WATER LANE, E.C.4

I dedicate this book to those brave officers of the Anglo-Indian Army who, from the Indus to the North-West Frontier, keep guard on the threshold of the Indian Empire. Alone, amongst hostile tribes, in the wild and desolate mountains of Afghanistan, they deserve the gratitude of their fellow-countrymen and the admiration of all those who realize the risks they run in carrying out their dangerous duties.

M. D.

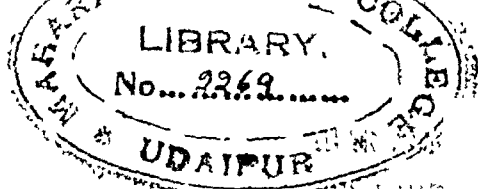
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FRIENDS AND LOVERS OR THE SPHINX HAS SPOKEN

I

THE setting sun is gilding the white walls of Peshawar, before it disappears behind the mountains of Afghanistan. The narrow streets of this Pathan city seem to awake with the dark. The Mohammedans come out of the Mosques after their evening prayer. The Sikhs butchers dispense pieces of mutton smothered with flies, and the squatting cooks in front of their hearths prepare doubtful hachis, which they mix with their hands. Between the native village and the British quarter, enclosed by barbed wire, tongas and two-wheeled buggies pass to and fro, drawn by white ponies.

The Peshawar Club, the English officers' club, awakes once more into life. Two majors in linen jackets arouse the Pathan who is enjoying his siesta under one of the billiard tables: "Boy! . . . Two *chota pegs*!"

The barman pours out two whiskies and soda. The boy, waking from his sleep, takes the cover from the billiard table and puts the snooker balls on to the green cloth.

The reading-room, which has been deserted all the afternoon, is suddenly lit up. English magazines are lying on the tables. There are sporting pictures covering the

walls: caricatures of polo champions, photographs of sports trophies and a print illustrating gallant deeds during the Afghan retreat.

Three high stools, in front of the bar, are occupied by Captain Rodney Johnson, R.F.A., Major W. R. O'Connell, 34th Punjab Regiment, and Algernon MacGregor, a lieutenant in the sappers. They are still in tennis clothes. But the setting of the sun, according to the inexorable custom in India, is the signal for the first whisky of the day. The soda bursts from its shell-shaped siphon. Virginia cigarettes are slipped from their silver cases, embossed with the regimental arms. The conversation at once turns to sport:

"That last set was tough, Johnson. . . . Your service is so hot, major, that I wonder the balls don't explode on the court like hand-grenades."

"Yes, but your back-handers are terrors."

"One does one's best."

MacGregor, who is sipping his *chota peg* as he glances through the *Bystander*, interrupts them with:

"Have you seen this? . . . Norma Sullivan is going to marry again."

"Which Norma Sullivan?"

"The Hollywood star. . . . Who do you think she is marrying? . . . Middleton. . . . Don't you remember Colonel Lewis Middleton of the 28th Bengal Lancers? He used to teach the Maharajah of Kassendra polo. . . ."

"No! Really! Middleton is going to marry an American actress?"

"And four times divorced at that, old chap! . . . First she married her hairdresser at Hollywood. . . . She left him to marry a producer. . . . She deserted him for

her partner, the handsome John Darew. . . . Eventually she dropped Darew to marry the President of the American Film Corporation. . . .”

“That makes four husbands . . . quite a nice four-some!”

“And so she has left the fourth, for Middleton.”

“And at that rate of striking, she’ll soon turn him down and marry a field-marshal.”

“He’s mad! He’s not marrying a wife, he’s marrying a matrimonial tester! Just like those fellows in motor works whose job it is to test cars for customers. She breaks in husbands for other women! . . . Middleton has some pluck.”

“He is not such a fool. . . . The more a woman has had to do with men, the more delightful she becomes.”

The three officers continue discussing the case of their friend Middleton. Is he going to send in his papers so that he can follow his “star” to the United States? Will he be a father or merely a deceived husband? With 1,800 rupees a month how can one offer pearls to a leading lady? Their remarks are suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a fine athletic-looking fellow dressed in Palm Beach get-up; a jovial-looking chap, with a tanned face, thick hair, almost colourless, powerful hands, and pale blue eyes. It is Major R. C. Dunne of the 74th Battalion of Guides.

“A small whisky, Dunne?”

“A double. . . . I say, you fellows, have you heard?”

“What?”

“Mobilization at Kabul.”

“Have you brought down a tiger with your flit-spray?”

Major Dunne looked at the speakers. Then with a pause, sure of the effect of his remark, he announced the

great news: "Roberts has left the Guides to go into active service on the North-West Frontier."

"What?"

"You mean Edward Roberts who went with me on that memorable pig-sticking outfit: four wild boars, two horses killed and two broken arms?"

"That's the fellow."

"Why does he want to go on active service?"

"That I can't tell you. . . . All that I can tell you is that Roberts, when he returned from leave, asked to be put on the High Commissioner's List for a period of three years. . . . I've seen it in the *Gazette*. . . . It's official."

The news seemed to astonish the three officers. It was so unexpected, so sudden. They knew better than anyone what this voluntary enrolment in the Scouts Corps on the North-West Frontier meant: a perilous life, in a desolate district—the wild inhospitable Indo-Afghan frontier; a sort of temporary retreat in the small forts and outposts scattered amongst disaffected tribes, whose one idea is pillage, insurrection and ambushade. Why Captain Roberts, such a lover of society, gay dinner parties, dances and flirtations at Simla, Ooty, Mussoori, and all those summer resorts, where one amuses oneself as much as one possibly can in India—why did Roberts after six months' leave take a sudden resolution to go and bury himself down there amongst the barren and solitary mountains, where death lurks at night under the immutable stars?

A fifth officer came and joined the group: Captain Beauchamp-Maxwell. Slim, wearing Jodhpur riding-breeches, a short-cut red moustache, a quizzical look in his eyes, and a swinging gait. Captain Beauchamp-Maxwell is the Delhi chronicle. Attached for two years to

the Viceroy's staff, he hears and knows everything. He is the St. Simon of India. He is acquainted with the intrigues for promotion, and broadcasts the latest bits of scandal in Calcutta. He was the first to know that the Maharanee of Dranagore had been seen dancing at Firpo's with a young, good-looking lieutenant in the Madras Pioneers. He knows that the English attaché is worried owing to the Maharajah of Sravana's eldest son's liaison with a former actress at the Haymarket in London. And when by accident he does not know all the circumstances of a scandal he invents some amazing details with the imagination of a first-class serial writer.

O'Connel was the first to greet him :

" Tell me, old man, have you heard as well, that Roberts of the Guides is transferring to the Border Scouts? "

" Naturally! . . . "

And rapping with his knuckles on the bar counter he called to the Hindu barman :

" A dry Martini, boy. . . . And hurry up, you son of a gun! What was it you were saying, old man? . . . Oh —yes! Roberts is retiring from the gay life. . . . You won't see him dancing with the belles of Simla any more, nor playing ping-pong with the Governor's wife. . . . No more drawing-room tricks. . . . Bully beef, red sand and bandits. . . . But what's brought him to this? . . . "

The young staff captain winked, sipped his Martini and let fall :

" A woman."

" No! "

Women are not often discussed in English military

clubs. But on special occasions, when a fellow-officer is the hero or the victim of some affair, curiosity is aroused and the eternal black buck hunting and polo stories are discarded for the moment.

Beauchamp-Maxwell seemed pleased at having interested his four listeners. He continued :

" You can take it from me, as I am also just back from six months' leave . . . like Roberts. . . . And by a strange chance, in London, I got wind of a very curious story. . . . I made the acquaintance of an extremely wealthy Argentine, a large ranch owner, who used to come to my club. One afternoon this M. Perez came up to me and said :

" ' Last night I met one of your officers in the Indian Army . . . Captain Roberts. . . . Do you know that name? ' "

" ' Quite well. . . . Edward Roberts, or as he is familiarly called Eddie Roberts of the 44th Guides. . . . Where did you meet him? ' "

" ' At the house of a South American gentleman, a M. de Nogales. . . . Between you and me he plays a very high game . . . baccarat and chemin de fer. . . . Your friend lost very heavily. . . . I remarked playfully to Lady Highmott: " The Indian Government must pay their army very well for a young captain to be able to risk so many rupees on the ' nine ' ! . . . " ' "

" I listened attentively to M. Perez' story, especially as I happen to know that Roberts' financial position is not too sound. My Argentine friend then added :

" ' Mme. de Nogales, I noticed, seemed to be extremely interested in this good-looking captain. . . . I caught sight of several glances between them that were not meant

to be seen by her husband. But the best part of it, my dear sir, came when we were going away, about four in the morning. While M. de Nogales took the bank and played like a demon, in a cloud of smoke, surrounded by twenty of the guests. I was in the hall and saw a picture which would have appealed to the brush of a Fragonard. . . . At the far end of a little unoccupied room I saw your captain of the Guides embracing the beautiful Mme. de Nogales, who languishingly offered him her lips with tropical fervour! . . . I had the good taste to slip out through the door as quickly as possible and disappear discreetly. . . . But if this officer is one of your friends, I beg you to advise him in the future to be more careful and shut the door when he kisses a lady on the lips . . . in London especially, one does not treat these rhythmic gymnastics in a casual manner. If M. de Nogales had caught him, he would most certainly have caused a scandal, for he is very vindictive. . . .’

“ Well, that’s what I learned during my leave. So you will probably share my opinion when I put it down to a woman, this sudden decision that our friend Roberts has taken.”

The four men looked at one another nonplussed, for the disclosures of their friend opened out so many possibilities. Young MacGregor was the most upset. He drained his drink at one go and exclaimed :

“ Leave is the very devil! . . . One spends six months in Europe. One has a jolly good time. . . . The girls turn our heads and we come back here with a hump big enough to make every mongoose in the Punjab weep bitter tears. . . . If I were the Commander-in-Chief I should give six months’ leave every year . . . and why

not a Rolls Royce and a little yacht at Bombay while you are at it? . . . Seriously, speaking of Roberts, I bet he's madly in love with this woman. She has sent him to the devil and our deported Beau Brummell has come back to India with a heart bound with crepe . . . his illusion buried; so he wants to study horticulture in the Khyber Pass."

"Horticulture! That's good. . . . Rose growers and apple cultivators can cut those districts out of their excursion programmes."

"If Roberts has been had on toast by a pretty woman, I know him, he feels himself disgraced."

"What an idea! . . . I promise you that if the beautiful Dolores del Rio or the charming Clara Bow did not take a fancy to me I should certainly not go and break stones on the Cashmir roads. . . . Roberts must have Latin blood in his veins. He makes too much of these sentimental episodes."

Major Dunne's remarks amused his friends, who began chipping him:

"I say, major . . . you talk like a blasé husband. . . ."

"So I am. . . . I've served fifteen years in the home service, but my wife hasn't conferred on me the Star of India. . . . She's made me just C.D.E."

"What's C.D.E.?"

"Cheque Drawer Extraordinary. . . . I'll bet Beauchamp's story is right, and if Roberts is going to bury himself in despair in that infernally outlandish spot, he is mad. . . ."

"You don't know what it is to fall in love with a woman who won't have anything to do with you."

"No. . . . At twenty-five, in London, I fell in love

with a chorus girl at Drury Lane. . . . She didn't care for me. I didn't become a Trappist, damn it! . . ."

"What did you do?"

"I proposed to her young sister, who was also a chorus girl at Daly's Theatre near by. . . . It did the trick, she immediately said that she was ready to love me."

"And so?"

"And so I dropped the two of them and went salmon fishing in Scotland. . . . Roberts should have done the same. . . . When I have a son, as soon as he is twenty I shall give him the following formula: If you get turned down by the girl of your dreams, go fishing."

II

THE camp at Kohat sleeps under the sultry heat of the afternoon sun. A few Pathan soldiers on fatigue duty are loading a wagon with boxes of stores. A sentry mounts guard in front of the staff quarters. Beyond the pepper trees, covered with white dust, droops the British flag. Not a breath of air moves it; even the crows do not caw. The little grey squirrels no longer skip from one palm tree to another. The avenues of the military quarters are deserted. The sun pours down mercilessly.

Suddenly an army sports car pulls up in front of the silent quarters. An officer gets out. Colonial topee, khaki trousers, country kit. He makes his way into the cool fresh shade of the corridor, with its bare walls, and arouses a native non-commissioned officer who comes to attention:

"Is the commanding officer of the Zara Scouts there?"

"No, captain. . . . But the adjutant is in the orderly room. . . . The second door on the right, captain."

"Thanks."

The officer enters and salutes his fellow-officer, who rises at his desk, and he introduces himself:

"Captain Edward Roberts, 44th Guides. . . ."

The adjutant smiles in recognition:

"Pleased to see you. . . ."

"Have you received instructions from the High Commissioner of Peshawar detailing me to the Zara Scouts?"

"Yes. . . . Everything is in order. The Inspector-General of the Frontier Corps has also given me exact instructions as to your station."

"Where am I being sent?"

"To Tundi Kana. You will take over Fort No. 4. . . . It is a pleasant post for those who do not wish to be worried by neighbours."

"Fort No. 4 is at the far end of the Ozid valley, isn't it?"

"That's right. . . . You are two days' march from Bara Kushta Station. You are to relieve Gordon, who is detailed to the Quetta command. You will have three Pathan officers, but no subaltern under you yet. One will be appointed later. . . . You will be alone with your *Naib Tahsildar*,¹ Sohbat Khan by name. He is a very trustworthy fellow who has proved his value to Gordon. You can place all confidence in him. . . . A cigarette?"

"Thanks."

"I hope you have brought some books, because you'll need something to pass the time. It isn't as amusing as tea at the Savoy! . . . In case you are short of anything to read send a word by wireless and I'll let you have some novels from the club by the next supply convoy."

"Thanks very much."

"Ah! I know that district, my boy. . . . It is beautiful, magnificent, but how depressing! For four

¹ An Indian civilian officer appointed to a company of Pathan Scouts.

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years I was stationed between Kohat and Kuram. I promise you, you've got to be fond of your job to stand it. . . . I don't believe in gilding the pill. It is all the harder. I know you have just got back from leave, and on my honour after six months at home you'll find it a nasty shock! But you'll get used to it. You'll see. . . ."

"Are the natives quiet?"

"Oh yes, fairly. . . . It may last or it may not. . . . However, when Safed Koh's people get restive it makes a diversion. Five or six months ago Gordon arbitrated between these gentlemen. After two weeks' palavering it ended by a shot which shaved his left ear during a *jirgah*.¹ . . . Then quietly, without telling anyone, he organized a nice little punitive expedition, which soon knocked sense into Safed Koh. Result: A reprimand from the civil authorities and at the same time a recommendation from the Inspector-General for the Military Cross. . . . That made things square."

"By the way, what interests me particularly is the post. . . . When does one get one's letters out there?"

"Every fortnight by the convoy. It carries the mail."

"Unofficial messages?"

"Sent by telegraph. Then by heliograph. Do you expect many wires from England? If by chance you are anxious about the health of a relative, I will make an effort to expedite the transmission, rely on me."

"Thanks. . . . I haven't any family over there. . . . but, however, I want to know. . . ."

"Am I indiscreet in asking if you are married?"

"No. . . . A bachelor."

¹ A rebel court of justice.

"It is a matter of opinion."

"Oh! I'm not trying to make converts."

"I—I am married. My wife can't stand the climate, so I've sent her to Cashmir—to Srinagar. But as you are unmarried I understand you coming to us. India is no paradise for confirmed bachelors even in Bombay or Calcutta. So you may just as well bury yourself in the solitude of Waziristan. By the way, old man, you know something of these parts, so I need not remind you that it is better not to get mixed up with any Pathan women."

"Oh! My dear sir. . . ."

Roberts' gesture expressed plainly that his bachelor thoughts were never disturbed by visions of forbidden and unapproachable Moslem women.

"Don't mistake me. I was speaking not as an adjutant but as a friend. . . . I don't know whether you remember that during a raid among the Mohunds, one of our non-commissioned officers flirted a little too much with the wife of a 'grey beard,' a spingiri, as one calls them. . . . We soon paid the piper. An ambush, seven killed and thirty-six wounded."

"Rest assured on that score. . . . If you knew how far I am from thinking of that . . ."

Roberts stopped short as if he thought there was no need to say more. His fellow-officer rose.

"Well, Roberts, a safe journey to Fort No. 4."

"Thanks."

The car rolls along the ochre road. The bedding and suit-cases are piled up alongside the soldier-chauffeur. Alone, at the back, Roberts sits pensive. A fine, well-

shaped head, pale, with piercing eyes. An aquiline nose surmounted a strong chin. His moustache is close cut, light brown hair, a frame solidly built. Without being a champion at any particular game, Roberts played them all well. He was an excellent shot. Subaltern in 1918 some months before the armistice, he amused himself in the trenches on the Yser sniping; at six hundred yards he never missed a man who showed himself. Attached to the Indian Army he had always had soft jobs, thanks to the influence of a friend, a colonel on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief. . . . And while the car rolled along towards Kuran, Roberts recalled these various billets with a curl of his lips, almost a grin, which hid the bitterness of his thoughts. Ah! It all seemed a thing of the distant past! A time when he led a happy-go-lucky life as staff officer at Madras. When he hunted with the Maharajah of Naipas. When he flirted freely and never missed a ball at the Government House. He awoke every morning with a light heart and went to bed satisfied with the world at large. There was nothing to interfere with his *joie de vivre*. Happy days. . . .

Now the grey sports model, marked *W.D.*,¹ swept along to those wild mountains over which two monsters hovered night and day: Boredom and Anxiety. No more pleasant hours at the club, chats after the day's sport, enjoyable strains of music in the moonlit gardens. He had chosen to see service on this warlike frontier. He had wished for exile. Instead of getting himself appointed to a picked job, he got hold of a friend of his at Delhi, and thanks to him, and also owing to the fact that he could

¹ War Department.

speaking Pushti and was familiar with the North-West tribes, he had succeeded in his request.

Two months ago he had been in London, in the very heart of civilization, with the comforts and pleasures of modern life. Every turn of the car's wheel took him farther away, and brought him nearer to Fort No. 4, where as a willing exile he would be able to meditate in solitude, and each day unroll a little more of the ribbon of the past that philosophy lodges in our brain just as a snail lodges in its shell.

After a two day journey through the refractory zone of Kuram, more or less peaceful at the moment, Roberts arrived near Blockhouse 18. Cars did not go any farther. The blockhouse is a high square building with few openings surrounded by a double network of barbed wire. The terrace which forms the roof is surmounted by two shelters flanked by sandbags, behind which two sentries keep guard day and night. At sunset, the officer on duty pulls up the iron ladder which gives access to the blockhouse and shuts the armour plated door.

Roberts, to reach his fort, intends to take advantage of the food convoy, composed of six military mule wagons escorted by a couple of sections.

"Captain," said the officer in charge of the fort, "the convoy is at your disposal. . . . I have heliographed Blockhouse 19, who has told the *subadar*¹ the probable time of your arrival. . . . In case of alarm a platoon is under arms ready to meet the convoy."

"Is it quiet about here?"

¹ Indian lieutenant.

"Quiet? . . . Yes, officially. . . . But, if you don't want to ask for trouble, it is wiser not to stroll about alone. . . . The *subadar* has taken it upon himself to double the escort."

"Good. . . . Let the column fall in. . . . As soon as they have loaded my kit we'll start."

"Yes, captain."

The column started over the rough track cut between the rocks along a ravine which grew narrower and narrower. The morning sun could not dispel the grim look of the pass. Nowhere has Nature assumed a more repellent aspect than in this inhospitable district. The rugged rocks with their jagged crevasses and their dark chasms looked like the wounds inflicted by titanic giants when they fought against the untamed elements. The earth had won, but it had been wounded in these great prehistoric combats.

The winding track was still hoary with dew. An ideal spot for an ambushade. In spite of the alarming character of the surroundings the convoy is not attacked to-day. Roberts meets some groups of natives, who watch these representatives of British power pass by, with supreme indifference, while their goats continue browsing on the few tufts of burnt grass or odd shrubs which grow with difficulty in the shadowy corners of the pass.

The little column marches more quickly. The sun begins to sink behind the barrier of jagged peaks which stand sentinel at the Afghan frontier. It is wise to try and reach Fort No. 4 before nightfall. Two miles yet and there are the four bare red walls. They stand up on a spur of a rock, which overhangs the valley. A double row

of spiked bars protects the high walls; one would think oneself before a monastery, where the monks meditate, between their daily prayers, on the futility of vain human disputes. But this is not the sanctuary of these men who honour in silence the Saint of the fraternity and who call upon the Holy name of Him who died to teach us to love one another. . . . It is a fort. . . . Fort No. 4. . . . Two machine-guns are mounted on the north-west and south-west. . . . There are no old manuscripts, but boxes of ammunition in the cellars. A wire runs between two signal posts. . . . Pity has no place in this valley, where Death roves with a sinister smile on its emaciated face. . . . The *subadar* salutes his new superior officer at the iron doors which close behind the wagon as it enters the courtyard. He conducts Roberts to his quarters and explains:

"These were Captain Gordon's quarters; you will not be too hot, captain. . . . The two windows are narrow and the iron shutters are bullet proof. The *Thasildar* is out on patrol. He will report as soon as he comes back."

"Very good. Thank you."

The *subadar* saluted and went out as the orderly came in with the kit. The installation did not take long. There was only an iron bed, a table, two chairs, and a chest of drawers. While the orderly put his things away in the drawers, Roberts stood in front of the window looking out on to the immense valley as the light faded rapidly. A curtain of purple haze hung over the horizon, hiding the frowning mountains, whose outlines were slowly disappearing. Not a light. Not a sign of life. For some time Roberts fell fascinated by the isolated grandeur of the desolate panorama.

His orderly went out quietly. He turned and inspected the bare room. A room? No, a cell. He looked at the table where he would write; the little iron bed, where in future he would sleep. Then he opened his cabin trunk marked E.R. containing his personal papers. He foraged amongst the letters. At last he found what he sought. He went up to the little bed, drew back the counterpane and gently slipped a photograph in a silver frame under the pillow.

III

*Captain Edward Roberts, Indian Army, to Captain
Seglignac, African Army.*

Fort No. 4.,
ZARA SCOUTS, N.W.F.P.
April 5th, 1929.

MY DEAR SEGLIGNAC,

The hard times we had together as subalterns on the French front during the closing scenes of the great European drama, left their mark on us and cemented our friendship for ever. May I then, in the name of those old days, give you my confidence and ask a small favour.

You are, as a matter of fact, the only man to whom I can open my heart. To begin with, because none of my countrymen would understand me. And above all because you, a Frenchman, look with a sympathetic eye on the errors of passion. You do not treat the victims of love with that superior air of condescension or contempt that we English affect with ostentatious virtue or hypocrisy.

I want a confessor. Well, I am *not* one of the faithful. To whom then can I lay bare my aching heart if not to a chivalrous brother in arms, who serves his country on the confines of Morocco as I serve mine on the frontiers of India? Listen, Seglignac. . . . Soldiers call a spade

a spade. I am going to speak plainly : I have been within an ace of wrecking my career. . . . In an affair of honour, love and money, I have well-nigh lost my commission and the esteem of my fellow-soldiers.

Here are the facts. You remember that last summer, during our leave, when by curious good luck we both happened to be on the Riviera, you introduced a very handsome woman to me that you knew slightly, Mme. de Nogales.

A little while after, I sent you—but I don't know if you ever got it—an effusive and cryptic wire, something like this :

"Don't wait for me in Paris. Am fascinated by your rare bird. Hope not to miss a fine shot."

Well, old man . . . if you had been a thought reader, you would have come at once to Cannes and dragged me from a shoot so full of imminent dangers. I should, of course, have laughed in your face and followed my fate. For good advice is like a spur digging into the flanks of bad resolutions.

Perhaps you do not remember Mme. de Nogales. You know so many pretty women. But what a splendid creature! Fascinating and deliciously tyrannical. And, mark you, not a classic beauty. Something more dangerous than that. There is something about her more attractive than beauty! One of those women of whom one says : "What makes her so charmingly irresistible?" Her silhouette has soft gentle lines, although her nose has nothing classic about it; on the contrary. Her bust is not Clodian-like, but her *décolleté* is delightful to the eye. Perhaps after all the charm of most women is in the expression which illuminates

their faces and makes one blind to their academic imperfections.

This woman, of West Indian extraction, has eyes that conquered me the first moment I met her. One would have to be painter, poet, psychologist and disciple of Freud to do justice to their velvety lustre, their captivating depth, their commanding yet tender appeal. With eyes like that did I trouble to notice that her forehead was a little too prominent? And her fresh brown-tinted skin, like pale bronze satin that is always perfumed with a curious mixture of frangipane and amber. A skin and body, undoubtedly too plump to please æsthetes who admire less curved lines, has had the effect of upsetting my nights and changing into vague fancies my most deep-rooted resolutions.

Daughter of a Creole and an Englishman, she is married to a gentleman who hails from the Republic of Honduras, an idler who appears to live entirely in continental watering-places. A week after our first meeting we became inseparable partners at golf and tennis; we . . . that is to say, Alba and I. Because her husband, who preferred a siesta to a racquet and baccarat at Juan les Pins to wielding a driver, seemed very delighted that his wife had found someone who was keen on games. Whenever we dined together, at dessert he offered me cabinet cigars and joked: "Captain, I am glad you persuade my wife to take exercise. . . ." And he added sarcastically: "Because husbands can always trust an English officer."

The remark was flattering no doubt; but how very undeserved! My love for Alba increased each day. She realized it, though I did all I could to hide it. At

length, one day, as M. de Nogales had gone to play at Monte Carlo, his wife, with that cool audacity that was so typical of her, came to see me at my rooms. My good resolutions vanished one by one. Her coquetry broke the ice. Her bewitching voice. That voice that she knew how to use with consummate virtuosity, broke down my remaining scruples. Her eyes gave the *coup de grâce*.

Up to the end of September we lived in perfect happiness on the Riviera. Suddenly, without giving any reason, she left with her husband for London.

For the sake of appearances I did not follow till ten days later. This separation made me realize that I was madly in love. I found her in London in a small house that they had taken in Half Moon Street. I put up at an hotel near by, and our liaison grew more and more ardent. As autumn rains are not conducive to outdoor sports, I became a tame cat on their hearth. I dined with them every night. I took Alba to teas, concerts, and the theatre. Her husband, however, being an inveterate gambler, arranged baccarat parties every night and often thanked me for amusing his wife, whilst he took the bank in his smoking-room. Was he really so sure that English officers gave husbands no cause for anxiety? Was he shutting his eyes to the liaison which each day became more and more obvious? I did not know, and I did not give it much thought.

One evening as we three were at dinner M. de Nogales asked me :

“ When does your leave expire, my boy? ”

This sudden reminder of the brutal truth gave me a shock.

I pretended, however, to laugh, and replied :

"I am supposed to leave in twelve days on the *Rawalpindi*. Then it will be 'Good-bye, Piccadilly.' . . . Finis to the *blues* and the Kit-Kat Club. . . . Khaki kit, topee, inoculation against cholera, Bombay and the joys of army life from Hyderabad to the Afghan frontier. . . . Mosquitoes, spills at polo, and whiskies and sodas to cheer me up."

My host nodded his head.

"I am very sorry that you have to leave us so soon, my dear sir. Especially as I have a little bone to pick with you."

"With me? "

"Yes. You have never played with me. . . . Not even a small bank for a fiver. . . ."

"Oh! You know that cards . . ."

Alba looked at me with a little reproachful pout.

"It is quite true, my husband is quite right. . . . Why don't you stay with us this evening? . . . We are going to have some friends who love cards. It will be very enjoyable. I shall count upon you."

I could not refuse. At eleven o'clock the room was full. I was introduced to various people. A mixed crowd, comprising a young nobleman, an American artiste, well known on the halls, a wealthy Greek shipowner, some foreigners of doubtful nationality accompanied by pretty women whose social status was still more vague. We played. A little game of *chemin de fer* to warm us up. I won about fifty pounds. Alba, sitting next to me, served as my mascot. Each time I put down an eight or a nine she gave me a smile; the siren she familiarized me with the danger. The Greek shipowner

took the bank. I won and lost in turn, and then left the table.

Suddenly our amphitryon collected some players and said jokingly :

"Let us have a little original match for five minutes between Captain Roberts and I to celebrate his presence amongst us this evening. . . . The first bank £100; the second bank £200; the third bank £400, etc. . . . We'll draw for who shall deal first. Are you willing, captain? "

The fear of losing a large sum made me hesitate. While the guests present discussed with excitement the unexpected game, M. de Nogales came up to me and said very quietly and with a threatening smile :

"You are my wife's lover. . . . It will cost you dearly to refuse."

The polished and cunning cynicism with which he pretended to whisper these words upset me entirely. Someone called out :

"Well! Captain Roberts, do you accept? "

Alba replied :

"Of course! . . . He is going to beat my husband! "

I could not say no. The game began. M. de Nogales turned up a queen and I a seven. He dealt the cards. I lost the first £100.

"The bank is £200," he said casually.

I lost £200. The players gathered round, curious. I lost £400; then £800. Although I had taken more whisky than was wise, a thrill of anxiety brought me to my senses. My coolness did not hide my fear of losing. I wanted to stop. I could not. Alba sitting there by my side pressed my ankle with her little foot under the table. She whispered :

"You are going to win the last coup. . . ."

I played an eight. There was an expectant hubbub. My opponent replied calmly with an eight, then still more calmly with an ace.

I had lost the last bank, which brought the total to £3,100. A sudden dizziness came over me. The seriousness of the sum staggered me. . . . The true value of £3,100 began to dawn upon me. . . .

"Have you your cheque book?" M. de Nogales asked carelessly as he re-lit his cigar.

"No. . . . Not on me. . . . To-morrow I will send you the amount."

"That's all right."

I returned to my house like a man suddenly awakened from a dream with a cold douche full in the face. The impossibility of paying my gambling debt haunted me all the night. I made mental calculations. I had about two thousand pounds capital. . . . My entire fortune. In selling out my shares I should only realize two-thirds of my debt. The next day I went to the bank. They told me that the sale of my stocks would bring just one thousand five hundred pounds. Desperate, in the evening I went about six o'clock to M. de Nogales' house. I found his wife, who greeted me with an outburst of passion, saying:

"I hope, my poor darling, that you are not too worried about paying this debt?"

Without confessing the truth, I merely admitted that I was a little worried. She nodded her head sorrowfully, and petted me like an unhappy child.

"Oh, you will be able to arrange that with my husband . . . you'll see."

The husband returned. He shook my hand.

"My dear fellow . . . I am sorry that your luck was out. . . ." And added: "Have you the cheque?"

"No."

His face changed. He looked at me astonished.

"You have not thought of your debt?"

"Yes. . . . But I wish to speak to you."

He led me to his smoking-room. Then I said to him plainly:

"Listen. . . . You have persuaded me, in spite of myself, to join in a game beyond my means. . . . It was madness to accept. It is impossible for me to pay you £3,100 in forty-eight hours. . . . I offer you all that I possess . . . £1,500. . . ."

He put his monocle under his thick eyebrow and regarded me with a sneer.

"Ha! Ha! . . . You have a strange idea of honour, captain! . . . Half your debt? Have you taken a half of my wife?"

The insolence of the formula was such that I nearly threw myself upon him to settle the affair with my fists. But my good sense prevented me just in time. In that way I should only aggravate the situation.

"It is not a question of Mme. de Nogales, but of my debt. I will give you all I've got, that is to say £1,500, to-morrow. As for the rest, you will have to wait."

"Very well. You will pay me this sum as agreed, in forty-eight hours. I give you a week to find the rest."

"Where do you suppose I can find that amount in a week?"

"By borrowing. There is your army pay, isn't there? All I can say is, that if by next Monday you have not

settled, I shall be compelled to take legal action regarding your attachment to my wife, and according to the law of your country. . . . You will be mulct in damages to that amount, and the scandal it will cause will not be very favourable to your promotion. . . .”

Don't you see, my dear Seglignac, my position? An action for a divorce, in which I should figure as the guilty party, and an end to my career in the army. So I borrowed the amount on my future pay. I shall work it off in three years. But at what a price!

Naturally I did not want to tarnish the beauty of our romance with this sordid incident, so I agreed to settle the gambling debt as the husband suggested. Our last meeting was at the same time tragic and passionate. A bitterness was added to our caresses as my departure drew near. Our last afternoon was the most charming and at the same time the saddest of our *tête-à-tête*. The next day I left by a P. & O. boat.

When I arrived at general headquarters at Nowshera I asked to be put on the High Commissioner's List for transfer to the Frontier Scouts, which are very much the same as your *Corps de Meharistes*, with the simple difference that you patrol the desert, whilst we keep guard in the mountains. I should receive double pay, which would enable me to pay my debt more quickly, but I should have to live alone with five hundred Afridis on the Afghan frontier.

This, my dear friend, is the balance sheet of my leave. I have fallen madly in love with the most fascinating woman. I have said good-bye to her for three years; I have come back to India not only ruined, but in debt. This is what I had to tell you before asking the little

service that I trust you will do for me. I have been cut off from the world in this little fort for nearly two months. I have written many times to Mme. de Nogales, but I have had no reply. This silence is torture. I begin to imagine all sorts of things. So I am writing to ask you if by any chance you know what has become of Mme. de Nogales; if you don't know perhaps you will find out from mutual friends. Is she ill? Has she moved? I should be more than grateful if you could help me to find out the reason of her silence.

I await your news with impatience, my dear Seglignac. When you receive this long letter, if by chance you are with your *goum*¹ amongst the rebels, give a kind thought to your English comrade, who is experiencing like you the great solitude of the lonely mountains, with no consolation but the photograph of the woman of his heart in the pocket of his khaki tunic.

Yours,

EDWARD ROBERTS.

¹ Algerian Contingent.

IV

ROBERTS paced up and down his room with its bare walls, ill lighted by a single lamp on an ebony table. He had been waiting, with feverish impatience, for the arrival of the fortnightly convoy which brought the rations and the post. He had scrutinized the envelopes as they fell out of the bag: official communications, two or three post cards sent by friends from various parts of India, a military tailor's advertisement from London—that was all.

The envelope that he had been anxiously waiting for, for three months, was still missing. Again no answer from Alba. True, Seglignac had written to him, but he did not know what had become of Mme. de Nogales. So, disheartened, he had gone back into his quarters, and now with a curling lip and a frowning forehead he paced up and down. Sullen anger took possession of him. The cruelty of fate upset his usual *sang-froid*. He stopped suddenly in front of the wall as though in front of an obstacle that he wanted to fight, and with his fists he hit it several times to relieve his nerves. Then he sat down, or rather he sank down on the edge of his bed and stared in front of him.

His room! This voluntary prison, where he had chosen to live alone, *tête-à-tête* with his memories. . . .

It terrified him just at this moment. He longed to escape suddenly, and by means of some miracle to find himself transported to London to see her once again; she who had for so many days plunged him into so cruel an uncertainty. Why did she not reply to his letters or his cables? What was the meaning of this persistent silence after the mutual grief at parting? Could she have deliberately ignored his passionate appeals? Was it possible that she did not deign to send him a post card, a few affectionate lines, some sign of life? Even if she had gone to the West Indies, where her family lived; to Central America, where her husband hailed from, she could have found time to write to him. . . . So long a silence was inhuman on her part. Could some accident have happened? Had some serious illness necessitated her going into a nursing-home?

The wildest hypotheses, the most impossible suppositions passed through his mind. He was continually tortured by his impotence. . . . Isolated from the rest of the civilized world; an outpost, far away, lost among rebels, what could he do except bear stoically the agony of this uncertainty?

Now, overwhelmed, almost resigned, his elbows on his knees, his expressionless face between his hands, he did not move. He stared, as though in a dream, at the patch of yellow light which fell from the lamp-shade on the table, illuminating a photograph in a silver frame. It was Alba in evening dress with a tiara of diamonds in her hair. An ermine cloak threw up the splendour of the low-cut dress. She was smiling. Her soft expression was like a tender caress taken unawares. Her little hand grasped the fur. The beauty spot above her lip seemed to be a tempting challenge.

Roberts rose slowly. He sat at the table. He drew the portrait to him and gazed at it. He longed to question it. Although his lips did not move he seemed to ask :

“ Why do you not reply to me? Why do you remain indifferent to my suffering? What wrong have I done that you should abandon me in my exile? ”

His eyes could not leave the eyes of the absent one. He would have liked to smother that imperturbable face with kisses, to pull back the ermine cloak and display those beautiful shoulders and bosom with their dainty little rosebuds that he had so often caressed. This photograph was at the same time a delight and a grief. On some days he hid it from morning till night; then, when the time came for him to retire to his bedroom, he took it out of his dressing-case, like a miser unearthing his treasure; he put it in front of him on the table and his silent adoration commenced. He officiated all alone before the altar, where this holy ikon of his love of yesterday was enthroned. Other days he felt overcome with despair; by degrees it turned to anger. His impotence made him unjust towards Alba. He blamed himself. He cursed her fatal charm. He picked up the portrait ready to tear it up, to burn it in the flame of the lamp. But he stopped all of a sudden, his eyes fixed, his heart beating, with the portrait out of its frame, the portrait in his hands which he was about to destroy. Gradually he mastered his rage. Slowly he replaced the photograph behind the glass. And Alba once more appeared before him with her beauty spot above her lips, smiling, indifferent, imperious to his distress.

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That evening whilst he sat gazing at Alba, questioning

the adorable and ferocious sphinx who continued insensible to his grief, he was interrupted in his meditation by a knock at the door. His orderly entered :

" Captain, there is a letter for you, by the post. . . . It has just been found amongst the newspapers."

Roberts got up quickly, snatched the envelope from the Pathan soldier's hand and dismissed him. His heart was gripped by a false hope; he took the envelope into the light of the lamp, and saw at a glance that the white paper did not bear Alba's handwriting. But in turning over the envelope he discovered the crest of the Victoria Club; his disappointment was lessened because this letter would, without doubt, shed a little light in the darkness.

He read as follows :

" VICTORIA CLUB,
" PALL MALL.

" MY DEAR ROBERTS,

" When I got your letter from the North-West Frontier, I was surprised to see that you had taken such an uncongenial post. But this surprise was nothing compared with the astonishment that your message gave me. First I was rather perplexed. Your request asking me what has become of Mme. de Nogales seems to me, to begin with, an example of that humour which, along with orange marmalade, is one of the finest products of our country. You, Roberts! You ask me what has become of Mme. de Nogales? But, my good fellow, it is to you I should have written if I had wanted to know the movements and the whereabouts of this unapproachable beauty! Because as a matter of fact, last autumn, you seemed to be, much more than me, a constant visitor to the house.

"Forgive me for speaking plainly, but at that time I was told that you were having a serious flirtation with the wife of that inveterate gambler.

"Be that as it may, the tone of your letter leads me to believe that you did not take me into your confidence. However, I immediately set to work to try and satisfy you. I first telephoned to the house in Half Moon Street. A woman's voice answered:

" 'No, sir, I am not Mme. de Nogales. . . . I am Miss Featherbloom, secretary of the Astra Theosophical Society. . . . All I can tell you is that M. and Mme. de Nogales, the tenants who were here before us, left on the first of January.'

"The fact that she had changed her address did not help me in my searches. So I tried M. Apostolides, the Greek banker, who never missed a game at our friends' house. His reply was very definite:

" 'Oh! I don't know what has become of M. de Nogales. I had a somewhat heated discussion with him over the green cloth, and I have completely lost sight of him.'

"I was just going to write and tell you of the hopelessness of the search, when by the merest chance, the day before yesterday, I was put upon the track of the person who interests you. Just imagine. I was invited at the last minute to a surprise party at Dorothy Seabun's, the editress of the ladies' page in the *Evening Star*. A friend of mine, Raphael Sandor, with a cold chicken under his arm, and myself bringing a pound of caviare, were introduced to Dorothy Seabun.

"I will not give you the details of this surprise party, where I saw Lord Dewring represent, almost naked, the

death of Petronius, on the grand piano. I will content myself by saying that about four in the morning, Dorothy, slightly intoxicated, asked me to go into her room to help her to mend a ladder in her stocking. Suddenly I saw upon our hostess's dressing-table a beautiful photograph inscribed by Mme. de Nogales. Imagine my surprise. While Dorothy mended her stocking, in an acrobatic position, on the edge of her sofa bed, I asked if she had had any recent news of Mme. de Nogales. She exclaimed :

“ ‘What! You know Alba? She is a charming woman. I am very fond of her. . . . It is a pity she has made such an unfortunate marriage. Miguel de Nogales is a professional gambler who cheats at cards, and is obliged to change his place of abode in double quick time. . . .’

“ ‘I knew them when they lived in Half Moon Street. . . . Have they left London? . . .’

“ ‘Oh, my dear boy, you mean to say you never heard about it? . . . The incident of Nogales hopping off by aeroplane because he had to pay £18,000 in forty-eight hours. . . . Undoubtedly he had come across a gentleman who manipulated the cards better than he did. . . . They are, in fact, at Shepherd's, Cairo; Alba wrote to me from there the other day.’

“ ‘M. de Nogales hopes to whitewash his character in Egypt.’

“ ‘What—he? . . . Give up cards? . . . Why, if he got left by accident in the Museum at Cairo, he would play *ecarté* with Tut-ahk-Hammon.’

“That is, my dear old man, what I learnt and what I hasten to tell you. You know the new address of your *belle amie*. I hope you will not be tempted to join in *baccarat*

parties with her husband, because, between ourselves, I lost a hundred pounds at his house; it may not be a great deal, but I find it too much, when one discovers that one has been done out of it by a virtuoso of the 'nine.'

"Don't get too fed up amongst your Pathans, my dear old boy, and be sure to let me have a line from you every now and then.

"Yours sincerely,

"G. F. HAWKINS."

The letter was there lying under Roberts' eyes. He was glad to know at last exactly where Alba was. But he was upset by Hawkins' disclosure, or rather Miss Dorothy Scabun's. Although the love of cards that M. de Nogales professed had seemed to him unusual, he had never suspected his honesty. Could he have accused a man of cheating, because he had won over £3,000 from him in four banks? Now the circumstances were different. The disappearance of M. de Nogales proved that it was not his first attempt and that, on that memorable night, he had certainly faked the cards in order to get some thousands of pounds out of the man whom he knew to be his wife's lover.

Roberts re-read the end of his friend's letter and thought as he smiled sarcastically: The truth is, I have acknowledged a debt to a gentleman whose honesty is a myth. In three years I shall have paid to his lawyer a debt of honour that has ruined me and cost me half my yearly pay.

At this thought Roberts became pensive. He did not revolt against the cruel irony of fate, which compelled him to deprive himself to satisfy a crook. He knew quite

well that the deed he had signed at the solicitors bound him entirely, and that in default of documentary evidence, an action to free himself and show up the trickery of his opponent would cause a scandal that would be prejudicial to his military career. Besides, the money worried him less, as a matter of fact, than the fate of Mme. de Nogales. Poor Alba! Many a time she had confided to Roberts, had told him the uneasiness that her husband's obsession had caused her. At one time she had loved Miguel. Then as years went by this love had settled down into affection mixed with pity. . . . Her husband's love for her died, leaving her hunger for affection unsatisfied. Miguel de Nogales had, so to speak, thrown her over for cards. So she had sought consolation elsewhere. Being a Creole, the blood in her veins was warmed by the tropical sun, she must needs vibrate under the voluptuousness of repeated kisses. The longing to satisfy the physical desires, to answer the call of the senses. The tyranny of her femininity always awake.

Roberts, as he recalled these remembrances, immediately forgave her silence. He realized how Alba must have suffered.

Although M. de Nogales had carefully hidden his dishonesty and to her was just a player whose luck had deserted him, she was forced to lead a life with him bereft of happiness, spoilt by his bursts of bad temper, and the deceitful chicanery of her unsatisfactory husband. And she put up with it in spite of everything; she had not the courage to leave him. Or rather, ignorant of his baseness, she probably thought it her duty to stand by this unfortunate wretch, this slave of a passion from which he knew neither respite nor rest.

A deep sense of pity welled up in Roberts' warm heart. He now gazed at the portrait with intense emotion. He had never regarded Alba in that light. He seemed to be asking her pardon for having had such bitter thoughts, for having wrongly accused her.

Suddenly he took up a block of paper and began to write :

" DEAREST ALBA,

" You will be astonished when you receive this letter addressed to you at Cairo, but I have just heard of your departure to Egypt from a friend in London, of whom I asked news about you. I gather now that my letters may have miscarried, so your long silence seems less incomprehensible.

" To-day I do wish you could realize the wave of tender passion which flows through these lines, since maybe your life is perhaps not very happy and fortune is no longer kind to you. You must be aware, Alba, that I love you now just as I did six months ago. You have realized the strength of my love by the violence of my despair when I had to say good-bye to you for so long a time. I am sure you cannot have forgotten the last afternoon of my leave, the day before I sailed on the *Rawalpindi*.

" You cannot doubt, darling, that the memory of it helps to carry me through the terrible monotony of my exile. At this moment, as I write, your portrait smiles at me . . . you know the portrait, the one in evening dress, in which your southern beauty is set off in the white halo of your half-open ermine cloak? Well! It is not this portrait that I see, it is the adorable Alba of my last afternoon, coiled up in the chaos of a rumpled bed, under

the glow of a little lamp with its pale yellow shade. . . . An adorable memory, when tears moistened our kisses, when the closeness of this departure gave to our thrills the bitter taste of farewell. . . . Ah! my darling, why couldn't our afternoon last for ever, our last delightful afternoon! Could I ever grow weary of the touch of your skin like the petals of a satin tea-rose close to mine and of inhaling the marvellous perfume of your jet black hair? When one has loved like that one can live as a hermit, in the silence of an isolated fort; one can say to the world and its joys: 'I have drained the cup of human happiness, I ask nothing more.' . . . Unless, paraphrasing Schopenhauer, one agrees. All life is love. All love is sorrow. Then life is a misfortune. . . . Ah! no, my dearest one. Life does not seem a misfortune because I suffer on your account; or rather that fate has said to me it is necessary for us to part.

"You know that once a great pessimist wrote: 'After all my misfortune, what is there left. . . . For me? . . .'

"He was a poor man, because he was not able to say to himself that after his bad luck there remained the marvellous recollection of an incomparable love.

"Alba, my pulse races whilst I write to you. . . . My heart beats. . . . My dream takes shape. . . . I hold you in my arms. You are there, languishing as in those perfect evenings of our passionate embraces on the Riviera. Your naked arms embrace me in their loving clasp. Your eyes gaze at me between their half-closed lids. Your voice intoxicates me. Your happy smile and your pearly teeth teach me that life near to you is a dream of radiant joy. I no longer see the white walls of my room. I picture palms saluting the blue sea, studded with

reflections. I breathe the amber perfume of your skin.
. . . Splendid dream! Consoling mirage.

"Alba, I fear you may be unhappy. I know that your husband, by his fatal passion, exposes you to the basest deceptions. And I should like so much to console you. But my words coming from so great a distance, will they not vanish in space before they reach you?

"If you are afraid of the terrible sentimental loneliness which very often has saddened your beautiful eyes, remember that I am there. . . . So far away and yet so near to you. I implore you in the name of our love to write me a long letter and tell me what you are doing in Cairo. Think that over there, on the Indian Frontier, there is a heart which was yours and which still belongs to you.

"I shall look for your letter like a criminal condemned to death awaiting his pardon.

"Alba dearest, do not torture me any longer, send me a few words. It will seem like a little of yourself coming to me. I shall kiss the paper that your hand has touched. And on that day I shall believe that nature smiles on me and that the earth is more beautiful and the heavens are more blue.

"EDDIE."

V

AFTER many months of waiting, a very usual thing at the headquarters at Kohat, Roberts returned to Fort No. 4. The company of some fellow-officers on the staff of the Tochi Scouts had not distracted his thoughts. Alas . . . eighty days waiting in vain. He had returned to his fortified monastery without news from Egypt, without any reply to his last letter addressed to Shepherd's Hotel.

Alba's silence continued for nearly a year; it was inexplicable. The day after he had resumed his command the *subadar* brought him a wireless message from Kohat.

Roberts thought it was ordering him back to make a new tour of inspection in the district, and looked forward, without regret, to a little raid which would distract his thoughts.

He deciphered these words scribbled in haste by the operator at the post:

Adjutant Major Henderson to the Captain Commandant, Fort No. 4.—You are informed that Lieutenant F. D. Nicholson of the North Waziristan Scouts is appointed for duty under you. Lieutenant Nicholson will start to-morrow. On account of the growing unrest send subadar with escort three hundred men with instructions to await convoy at Blockhouse 19. Acknowledge receipt.

Under other circumstances the news would not have failed to please Roberts. In the present instance it annoyed him. An intimacy forced upon him by a stranger, the daily *tête-à-tête* with a new comrade was not to his liking. He loved his solitude amongst the Pathans. No one here spoke to him of the doings of the Western world. When he returned from a tour of inspection at the head of a *ghush*¹ of two hundred and fifty men, he used to shut himself in his room and take out his cherished souvenirs like a Brahmin at his meditations or a Janist at his prayers. Henceforth another civilized person, a companion in arms, would share his existence. He would occupy the adjoining room. They would take their meals together. The young lieutenant would disturb his day-dreams, ask for fox-trots or tangoes on his gramophone.

Roberts threw the message on the table. . . . Alas! What was the use of rebelling? The grandeur and the servitude of military life! The order was unalterable. He called the *subadar* and gave him definite instructions.

"To-morrow at dawn you will go with three hundred men and wait at Blockhouse 19 the coming of a lieutenant, who is detailed for duty under me here."

"Very good, captain. . . . The staff-major has at last detailed another officer to help you?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Nicholson of the North Waziristan Scouts."

"I am very glad on your account, captain. You will not be so lonely here, will you?"

"Solitude does not worry me. . . . Your Prophet

¹ A little column whose duty it is to patrol among refractory tribes.

Mahomet has said: 'One only knows oneself in solitude.' "

" Yes, captain. . . . God is great and Mahomet is his Prophet."

" Remember, let the column be on the march at five o'clock in the morning. . . . Also, I will inspect your men before you start."

" Very well, captain."

Two days later, about six o'clock in the evening, Roberts had gone up on to the east tower of the fort to inspect the armour plating of the sentry-box, when a cloud of dust in the valley showed him that the column was arriving. It wound its way slowly along the reddish track, among the rocks. In a quarter of an hour Lieutenant Nicholson would be there.

Roberts had the feeling that an intruder was coming to disturb him in his *thebaïde*; that there had been inflicted upon him, in spite of himself, the presence of a man who would be a daily witness of his melancholia. He had an intuition that this young lieutenant, a happy young fellow no doubt, would try to cheer him up in spite of himself, and try to cure him of his too obvious spleen. And the very idea of such an indiscretion annoyed him.

When he went down to the courtyard of the fort, to receive his new companion in arms, he showed on his face the signs of his formal resolution; he would greet Lieutenant Nicholson with studied, but distant politeness, in order to show him at once that any intimacy would be unwelcome on his part.

The armoured door creaked on its hinges. One could hear the tap tap of the sabots on the stones. A mule

brayed. A young officer, thin, erect, wearing a khaki turban of the Scouts, came up and saluted.

"Lieutenant Nicholson. . . . Good evening, captain."

Roberts returned his salute and stretched out his hand.

"You have not had any contretemps on your journey?"

"No, captain. . . . Here is my order of transfer to Fort No. 4. . . ."

"Thanks. I will show you your quarters; follow me."

Roberts led him along the passage on the first floor and explained the lay of the fort:

"This is our mess-room. . . . Not very luxurious, you see. Gordon, my predecessor, has left some pictures from *La Vie Parisienne* on the walls. They may amuse you."

"Oh! . . . I'm not particularly keen."

"On this side is my room. . . . That one will be yours. Very poor quarters, but you did not expect any better, I imagine."

"I have already had three years' active service on the frontier, so you see I am inoculated. . . . I ought not to be affected here. . . . It was Mitchell of the Tochi Scouts who was detailed to come to Fort No. 4. But he got six months' leave, so we fixed it up with the staff-major. I returned from leave five weeks ago; I didn't mind where I was posted. Consequently I took his place."

"I follow. . . . It is owing to this fortunate fact that you are appointed here."

"Yes, captain. If it had not been for my friend Mitchell I should still have been stationed at Sararogha."

"Quite so. Now I had better explain your duties to you. You know that every week we have to carry out one twelve-hour patrol and another of twenty-four hours, with a double column, on account of the threatening attitude

of the Zara Kehl. We shall share that duty. Each takes his *ghusht* in rota."

"Yes, captain."

"Now, as regards messing, do not count too much upon my company. I very often mess in my own quarters."

"Very well."

"It does not bore you to be alone?"

"Not at all. On the contrary."

"Good. To-morrow morning get in touch with the Indian officers and my *Naib Tahsildar*. They are trustworthy fellows. . . . The latter is in the confidence of the chief of the Zara Kehl, which, in case of rebellion, would be very useful to us. . . . He will give you a good idea of the attitude of certain tribes, which for some weeks past seem to be unusually restless. . . . Good night, Nicholson."

"Good night, captain."

The lieutenant went back to his quarters, followed by his orderly, who brought his bed kit. Roberts also retired. He heard the bang of the baggage as it dropped on the floor. Then hastily, as if he wished to put right something he had forgotten, he took Alba's portrait and hid it in his dressing-case and turned the key.

The next morning the *subadar* knocked at Roberts' door.

"Captain, the *Malik*¹ of the Zara Kehl tribes is in the courtyard and wishes to speak to you very urgently. I thought I had better tell you."

"You have done quite right. . . . Go and fetch the *tahsildar* and take the man into the guard-room."

¹ Chief of the tribe.

Roberts put on his topee and went down. He crossed the courtyard and went into the guard-room. The chief of the Zara Kehl was squatting on the floor, in Oriental fashion. He got up, praised God, and saluted the officer, who replied to him in *Pashtu* :

"To what cause do I owe your visit? . . . Have you come with hostile words upon your lips to defy the power of the King-Emperor, whom I represent here? Or do you come to pray for his protection to safeguard you and your tribe? "

"Captain, I simply want you, if it please God, to be the arbitrator in a quarrel that threatens to put my men face to face with those terrible fellows the Mirazis."

"I am ready to settle this dispute. . . . Where are the adversaries under your jurisdiction? "

"There is only one. He arrived at Zirram at dawn and will wait until sunset."

"In an hour I will come. . . . Call the *Jirgah*¹ in front of your house and order the two parties to be present. With the help of the All-Powerful, who will inspire me, I hope to judge equitably the dispute between you. . . . Go."

The old *Malik* saluted and withdrew. Roberts had once more to play a difficult part: to settle a dispute between two neighbouring tribes who were ready to fly at one another's throats. He set out with a small escort: his position as arbitrator protected him from any act of treachery.

The sun shone, dispelling the mist in the valley. The spurs of the mountains rose tier upon tier unevenly up to the horizon. No sign of life stirred in the immense

¹ A court of justice held in the centre of the village.

rocky mountain valley; above it hovered, high in the blue sky, birds of prey with watchful eyes. No flock was feeding on the parched herbage. Was it the uncertainty of a precarious peace which caused the herdsmen to keep their goats in the folds, and the caravans to desert the mountain tracks? On rounding a sharp rocky spur hewn by some Titanic sculptor, Roberts, who was marching at the head of his escort, followed by his faithful *tahsildar*, caught sight of the few white houses of the hamlet of Zirran. Each farm was surrounded by walls and a turret, which allowed its proprietor to espy, rifle in hand, any possible enemy. At the entrance to the hamlet several buffaloes wallowed in a pond of stagnant water. Two women in black, closely veiled, quickened their pace to get back into a mud hut. The arrival of Pathan Scouts did not seem to them to be a good omen. The *Malik* of the tribe appeared with a few of his headmen. They saluted Roberts and escorted him to the front of the primitive house which sheltered the chief's family, and made sign to a party of men to approach. They were armed with rifles—contraband rifles that they had doubtlessly bought from the owner of a secret factory in the valley of Kohat.

Roberts had the *Malik* of the neighbouring tribe presented to him; he in turn presented the man whose was the cause of the quarrel. He had a hooked nose and eyes like a bird of prey. No one unarmed would have cared to meet him at night on the Parachinar. At the direction of the *tahsildar* the chief of the tribe related the facts of the case. The man with the eyes had slipped by night into the village and the wife of one of the inhabitants, after having

gagged and bound her. The husband, being annoyed, had taken revenge by stealing the ravisher's cow-buffalo. The latter, enraged, had fired several shots without hitting him. The outraged husband's fellow-tribesmen set out to attack the neighbouring village, whereupon the chief, wisely inspired, went to beg the captain to arbitrate.

Roberts ordered the ravisher of the woman and the buffalo stealer to appear before him. They swore on the Koran that they would accept, without appealing, the decision of the judge. The inhabitants of the hamlets gradually came near and formed a circle round the improvised tribunal. Roberts questioned the first offender, the man with the eagle eyes:

"Why did you carry off this woman?"

"My lord captain, because this woman is young and unhappy with her husband, who is too old for her."

"But you yourself, you are no longer in your twenties."

"That's true, but I have the heart of a young lover."

"Do you think then, because you pretend to be cock of the poultry yard, that you have the right to steal all the unhappy women in the district?"

"If I had the right, and if God gave me the power to take three hundred each night, I should do it."

"God has not given you this power, but you have a strange conception of your duties towards other men. . . . The husband here present was absolutely right to take your cow-buffalo as a form of reprisal. . . . An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

"A tooth for a tooth, that is not a cow for a woman."

"You have not a wife. He cannot rob you of your

wife, he has taken the female which you most prized. You are wrong, therefore, to use powder and bullet, because you are the offender. . . . And you, what do you claim? You have the right of *Sharm*.¹ If your demands are reasonable, tell them to me."

The husband, a puny little grizzled man, with the cunning eyes of an old fox, hesitated and gazed successively at the chief of the tribe, the *tahsildar* and his judge.

"My lord captain, I wish to have my wife back and to keep the cow as compensation."

"It is impossible; justice demands that you restore the cow in exchange for your wife."

"But I cannot give him back his cow, because it is already in calf by my buffalo . . . why should I offer as a present to this miserable marauder the offspring of my beast? "

Roberts turned to the man with the eagle eyes.

"What have you to say to that? "

"My lord captain, why should I give back also his wife? I have consoled her and I do not see why I should offer to this offensive pig my son that is to be."

Roberts looked towards his *tahsildar* and smiled. He whispered in his ear. And as the Indian political agent nodded approval, he stood up and delivered sentence:

"Praise be to God, the All-Powerful who hears and to Mahomet his Prophet. I declare. . . . You, the ravisher of the wife, and you, the robber of the cow, will go and in forty-eight hours you will restore reciprocally what you have stolen. And in nine months you will exchange, if you so wish, the calf for the child or the child for the calf."

The inhabitants of the village nodded their heads as a

¹ Compensation for damages.

sign of approval while the chief of the tribe, the headman, congratulated Roberts on his wisdom.

At six o'clock in the evening Roberts had returned to the fort. He met Lieutenant Nicholson at the door of the mess-room. The young officer had just finished his tea and was going out. While the orderly got the captain's tea, who, a little cheered up by the case which had just come before him, explained the affairs to his subordinate and concluded :

"A funny bit of litigation, Nicholson. . . . A man takes another man's wife because he accuses him of being an unsatisfactory husband."

"One often sees the same thing in Europe, captain. But unhappily it is not settled with cows and calves."

The seriousness of the lieutenant's tone struck Roberts. He put his cigarette in the ash-tray and asked ironically :

"Have you ever arbitrated in a case like that on the other side of the Suez? "

"No. . . . Indeed. . . . I merely wish to point out, captain, that one should never joke about a story when the fate of a woman is at stake."

The lieutenant went out. Roberts, amazed, stared for some time at the closed door. Then gave a cynical smile and thought :

"That young man talks like an old Don Juan. I'll bet he doesn't even know what love means."

VI

THE tornado roared through the valley. Clouds of dust followed, danced in front, sweeping the red earth, attacking the immovable rocks. The two sentries at the corner of the fort, sheltering behind their armour-plated sentry-boxes, muffled up in their overcoats, protected themselves as well as they could against the violence of the hurricane. The mules, in the courtyard of the fort, neighed in alarm or hung down their heads with their backs to the wind.

An orderly came to tell Roberts :

“ Tea is ready, captain.”

Roberts did not move. He was sitting at his table. He was making mental calculations. All hope of getting news from Alba now seemed gone for ever. His letters addressed to Cairo had certainly been delivered, as none of them had been returned by the postal authorities. The awful fear that had obsessed him, that latent dread that the arrival of the post made so bitter, had now become an absolute certainty. Alba did not want to write to him any more. She had determined *never* to reply. Why? This definite fact now made him more miserable than the doubt; so long as he had hope, he had at least some comfort. But now hope had become a lying jade. Reality forced

herself upon him, definite, inexorable. And the wind of the storm, which whirled through the valley, seemed to carry away with it his last illusions. He was dead to Alba. Their sweet passion lay rotting in a common grave buried under a heap of withered flowers, their love slain. Forgetful mistress, she had no pity for him in his solitude. This thought above all cut him to the heart. Could it be possible for this adorable creature to illustrate so cruelly the old saying that with flirtations "Out of sight, out of mind"? But with the grand passion: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Surely their short liaison had been more than a passing fancy. Had he been rich he could have understood that she had been playing a part with him; and playing it perfectly. But Alba knew that the pay of a captain, even in the Indian Army, could not satisfy an ambitious woman. Besides, she would never accept anything from him beyond a bouquet of flowers; she had almost refused to accept the crest of the Guides in brilliants that he had offered her in London. To accuse her of greed, what blasphemy! A sensual Creole, but not mercenary, she had loved him with all the passion of her nature. Must he then admit that after his departure she had driven him completely from her thoughts with that power of forgetfulness which spares so many women the too bitter regrets and chagrins which torture them? Or was it that the letters he had written to her had been intercepted by her husband who did not wish to allow a sentimental correspondence between them?

These hypotheses kept crossing and re-crossing in Roberts' mind. When one appeared too improbable he turned to another. Eager to know, unable to admit

himself beaten in the struggle with these phantoms, he thought: "No! it is impossible. . . . Her husband cannot have intercepted all her letters. She knows that I have written to her more than ten times. . . . She does not reply because she looks upon our happiness as complete; because my return to India for three years has been the final act imposed by destiny. . . . Unless she does not write, in order to spare herself pain? . . . Perhaps she burns my letters so as not to be tempted to try and keep up an illusive happiness. . . . At least . . . At least until a new love comes into her life. . . ."

He clenched his fists, all of a sudden, as if he saw Alba before him in someone else's arms. A horrible vision which rudely upset his mental balance, let loose the very devil within him. Fixed in his seat, powerless, like a prisoner behind the bars of a cell, he tried to dispel this wave of passion which made him ill. . . . However, although he tried to master himself, the vision returned and became more vivid, more life-like. . . . Then he crumpled up the papers lying on the table and squeezed them in his hands as if he wished to make them suffer and give vent to his fury. . . . He tore them into shreds with a violence let loose by rage.

Alba in love with another man! But why not, after all! . . . Had he the right, poor simpleton, to monopolize the charm, the eyes, the physical beauty, the intoxication of this fascinating creature? She had deceived her husband with him. . . . Who next? . . . And he, the grotesque and infatuated lover, he imagined that he was the only person in the world who could awaken her passion, who was able to satisfy the senses of a woman neglected by a man who was not only imbecile, but

dishonest. No doubt she found, in London or Cairo, a brilliant successor, one of those handsome rich Egyptians, perhaps, who enamour women with their glances, which suggest voluptuousness, and capture them with necklaces of finest pearls.

He got up suddenly, his hands in his pockets, his jaw set at the irony of his fresh conclusions. He strode up and down his room and stopped dead in front of the mirror in which he shaved himself every morning. He taunted himself :

“ I have taken some months to realize this. . . . Poor fool. . . . I have sat up night after night under the lamp lamenting my distress to this coquette. . . . I have shed tears as I wrote to her. . . . I have put all my heart, all my despair into my long letters. . . . And when she received them she has torn them up without reading them, because her new lover was perhaps waiting impatiently in the vestibule at Shepherd's. . . . Or if she has read them she has said with a touch of disdainful pity : Poor boy ! . . . But naturally it was bound to happen. . . . Her body, more than her soul, has need of love. . . . Am I idiot enough to imagine that she would be faithful to me for three years, and then, at my next leave, pick up the thread of our kisses, like an interrupted serial ? ”

Carried away by impotent jealousy that spoilt his memories he tried to recall in the past everything he could think of that would justify his suppositions. He had in short profited by their introduction in Cannes, because chance had seen fit that he should please Alba at the exact moment when she was on the look out for a new lover. Any other man happening to meet her at that time, for the fate of a woman is very often only a matter of

opportunity, any other man would have snatched this flower which was ready to be plucked. Her rapid capitulation proved that she was in search of new sensations. She was by nature ardent and needed to be loved incessantly. Under the blue vault of the Egyptian sky, where the stars are reflected on the sleeping Nile, her Creole blood had circulated more quickly under her bronze coloured skin. And this new love had arisen phoenix-like on the ashes of the old. . . .

The wheel turns. The slow waltz of forgetfulness, which sows heartless tears and dances heedlessly on the doorstep of the new dawn. . . . Why love? Why weep? Why give your heart—that natural son of reason—to the wild beasts in the arena, to inconstancy that tears it, to jealousy that bites it, to suspicion that chews it with its fangs?

There was a knock at the door.

“What is it? What is it?”

“Tea is ready, captain.”

“All right.”

Roberts was suddenly brought back to reality. His orderly's voice had wrenched him from his bitter thoughts. Unjust also perhaps. . . . He hesitated. Should he go and have his tea in his own room or should he join Nicholson, who had just returned this afternoon from a two-day patrol? Although a banal conversation with his subaltern did not appeal to him, he overcame his predilections and determined to go to the mess.

“Good evening, Nicholson.”

“Good evening, captain. . . . A cup of tea?”

“Thanks. What sort of a patrol did you have?”

“Quite uneventful. . . . Like a stroll in Hyde Park

. . . without the trees. We just got back as the breath of the tornado raised the dust."

"The wind howls. . . . Do you hear it? "

"Yes. . . . I'll go and light the lamp, these clouds darken the sky. . . . If the wind blows any harder Solomon's throne will tumble over up there in the mountains; the Djinns of the legend are letting themselves go in this Dante-esque night. If they wake up the ghosts of the dead from here to the Khyber Pass they'll have a regular farandole."

"In this damnable place where we have to live, Nicholson, life's just a toss up."

"It has not altered much since 1838, captain. You remember at that time at Peshawar, the Italian general, Avitabile, who led the Sikhs, governed the district with four gallows, one at each corner of his residence; the bandits dangled at the end of a rope and instead of tender wreaths of everlastings they were buried under asafœtida. . . . Have some marmalade, captain."

"Thanks. . . ."

"As for me, I love this desolate place. . . . I have been stationed for three years in these parts. First, during the Kurram war, and from there I went to headquarters at Jandola."

"But you are quite young still."

"Twenty-five. . . ."

"I am eleven years older; that tells. . . ."

"You'll soon be a major."

"I suppose so. . . . I don't give a damn. . . ."

There was a silence. The wind outside made the armoured shutters rattle. Roberts took his pipe from his coat pocket and filled it with coarse cut Virginia.

"You can't find me a very good companion in exile, Nicholson. I like being alone. You must excuse me."

"So do I. By the way, I don't think I worry you, do I?"

"No. It seems worse to you as you're just back from leave."

"Yes. Five weeks ago. I spent the greatest part of my time in Egypt, where my mother stays on account of her bronchitis. I meant to go on to London intending to have a good time. But after all, Cairo isn't so deadly."

"Did you flirt much?"

"No."

The lieutenant's tone of voice gave Roberts to understand that he did not intend to open out on that subject.

"Ha! Ha! . . . You lie doggo about your flirtations, like the elephant."

"I don't hide them, but I keep them to myself."

"I was only joking, Nicholson, don't take me too seriously."

"Seriously? . . . Oh no. . . ."

"Come, my dear fellow, I was just pulling your leg. You're very thin skinned, very alarmed lest I should touch upon sentimental affairs. The other day, apropos of that silly business about the wife stealing that I had to arbitrate upon, you said, very seriously, that one ought not to joke where a woman's fate was at stake. . . . Do you take love as seriously as that?"

The lieutenant raised his head, and with an expression of firm conviction he replied, measuring his words:

"Yes. . . . Very seriously."

"You are still young! . . . When you have reached thirty-five, like me, you'll have experienced the cruelties

and deceptions of life. Like everyone else. Destiny has some nasty smacks on the face for you up her sleeve. Hitherto you have only met with smiles and kindness. I suppose I was just the same about your age. Since then I have learnt my lesson. Every disillusion in love leaves its mark on one's heart. . . . So when one gets a good blow one staggers under the shock and then one begins to laugh, Nicholson, do you understand? One laughs at having suffered for nothing. . . . Take love seriously—what nonsense! You will find out later, like everyone else, in spite of your romantic ideas and your fanciful hopes. Women will soon make you change your opinion. . . . One evening you will come across the woman of your dreams. You will say: Hurrah! . . . This is my grand passion. . . . You will set off, not to the Never Never Land where Peter Pan wanted to fly to, but to the Ever Ever Land where lovers live for eternity. . . . And you will discover very quickly that this Eternity lasts six days, six weeks, two years, and then: Down goes the curtain! The comedy is over. . . . You will have proved once more that *la donna e mobile*, and those who take love too seriously, are either foolish or blind.”

Roberts stopped; he was conscious of having spoken with unusual vivacity. He lit his pipe with his lighter. And as Nicholson did not say anything he made an evasive gesture.

“Of course what I have just said is only an opinion. I am not trying to convince you.”

“You would not succeed, captain.”

“I suppose not. If we had not the sacred right to love as we pleased what would become of our personality? In civilized life we all wear the same kind of clothes, cut

according to regulation; we obey the same social laws; our thoughts are moulded by a common tradition; we eat the same bread; we play the same games; we ape one another with ridiculous slavishness. . . . If we had not the right to love according to our own ideas we should only be automatons, escaped from the great bazaar of Humanity."

Nicholson got up.

"You are right, captain. . . . That is why it is futile for us to discuss the eternal theme. . . . Let me be among the imbeciles and you remain among the far-seeing ones."

"Nicholson. . . . You are not angry? I don't want the first long conversation that we have had together to be the cause of a misunderstanding between us and that . . ."

"No! No! . . . After all, it is not a difference of opinion. It is a difference of eleven years. . . . Quite enough. . . . Excuse me. . . . I am going to write some letters in my room."

"By all means."

Nicholson went out. Roberts finished his tea, knocked out his pipe against the stove, and went off to his room, locking the door.

His unusual agitation had calmed down. He was amazed that he had talked in such an excited tone. What did it matter to him whether or not this young fellow took love seriously? Why this outburst? Why this fit of pessimism? Because he was certain that Alba was now neglecting him for someone else? Suppose it was a false accusation?

Perhaps she was living quietly with her husband, without any other adventure, without any other desire than to

"Yet a love affair broken by separation. He had so

"You, in a moment of despair, attributed inconstancy to thirty-five without any justification. What proof had he that

Alba had already forgotten him in the arms of one or more successors? None.

He was suddenly conscious of having been unjust to her. His keys hung in his table drawer. He took them to open his dressing-case. He took out the portrait that had lain there for some days and looked at it again. The dumb caress of the dear large black velvety eyes seemed to reproach him for his unkind thoughts. Regret overwhelmed his heart. He recalled some of the things he had said to Nicholson. Bitter words inspired by suffering. He wanted now to retract them. Then, as he could not, he kissed the portrait and thought: "Darling, if I have offended you, forgive me, I love you."

VII

TO-NIGHT absolute silence hung over the valley. After the tornado of the preceding week, which had swept the whole Mahsud district as far as Peshawar, dying on the banks of the Indus and breathing its last breath against the iron lattice-work of the Attok bridge, calm at last reigned. Nature, at any rate, observed a truce. The air and the earth had signed a temporary armistice.

Unfortunately it seemed that humanity had not thought fit to follow their example. The *tahsildar* had found that out from two messengers, who for fifty rupees a month overheard the designs of the *mullas*¹ in the neighbourhood. They began by accusing the Anglo-Indian Government of secretly supporting the claims of a new pretender to the throne of Kabul. What would be the result? No one could foresee. It was wise, in any case, not to live in a fool's paradise.

Roberts had ordered Nicholson to keep watch till dawn and await the return of a third spy who was entrusted with a secret mission. He was a camel-driver from Kandahar, whose loyalty was beyond suspicion and whose information had almost always been proved correct by future events.

¹ Afghan priests.

Roberts after many restless hours had at last fallen asleep in his little iron bed. About one o'clock in the morning he was awakened by the *tahsildar*, who came into his room, very quietly.

"Captain. . . . I have to report that I have just heard two distant shots from the south-east, exactly in the direction where our men must come. . . . Bacha Ali assured me that he would be back at the fort between one o'clock and three o'clock in the morning, coming from Tundi Kana. . . . It is annoying. Because if they shot Bacha Ali, on his way, we should lose a very valuable informer."

"Wait a minute, I will go and warn Lieutenant Nicholson. We will go to the look-out post."

Roberts hurriedly slipped on his tunic, went out into the passage and found his fellow-officer's door open. Seeing Roberts come straight into his room, Nicholson hastily slipped the letter he was writing under the blotting paper and got up. He seemed a little flustered. He exclaimed in a surprised tone:

"You are awake, captain? . . . Don't worry yourself. . . . You see I am doing a little letter-writing to kill time. . . . The *subadar* has reported nothing since half-past twelve."

"There is something doing now. . . . The *tahsildar* has just heard two shots from the direction in which Bacha Ali has to come to-night. It's not a good sign. . . . Come with me to the south-east look-out post. . . . At the present moment Bacha Ali's life is more precious to us than all the Mandarins of China."

The two officers crossed the courtyard of the fort and went along the battlements that led to the post. The

Pathan sentry, sheltered behind the loopholes, was keeping sharp watch on his sector. The moon, in its second quarter, lit the Ozid valley brightly enough for one to be able to make out its chief landmarks. Roberts asked the soldier :

" Seen anything special? "

" No, captain. . . . But I have heard two rifle shots."

The *tahsildar* came up.

" You see, captain. . . . He did too."

" In what direction were the shots? "

" Over there. . . ."

" The people of Tundi Kana haven't a vendetta on the go, have they? "

" I don't think so."

Nicholson asked the *tahsildar* :

" Your friend Bacha Ali knows exactly how to get to the fort? "

" Yes, sir. . . . He could get through the two defences of barbed wire with his eyes shut. . . . He has come back ten times on a dark night."

" I should much prefer a night without a moon. The night watchers rub their rifle-sights with a touch of phosphorus which gives a target at four hundred yards, even in a bad light. . . . And during a patrol round Fort Mardan, one of my men . . ."

Nicholson did not finish his sentence.

. . . . Psssss. . . . Bing!

The bullet flattened itself on the dust-coloured armour on the side of the sentry-box, about six inches from the *tahsildar's* head. A distant detonation resounded dully.

The three men looked at one another. The Pathan went to the sentry-post. Roberts remarked :

"I don't like the way they play with our sentry-box. . . ."

"You see, *tahsildar*? What I just said about the phosphorescent rifle-sights is not a joke."

The native nodded his head.

"What annoys me most is their method of telling us that they know about the return of Bacha Ali. . . ."

"If his return is discovered, we are certain to be shot at."

"Then, captain," said the *tahsildar*, "we ought to light the red signal on the western tower. He is sure to see it from a distance and he will know that we are warning him only to approach the fort with extreme caution."

"Quite right. . . . Go and give the order to the *subadar* to light the lantern."

"Yes, captain."

The lieutenant slipped along the battlements and went down into the courtyard.

"The only drawback to the signal is that we also warn the people in the mountains that we are expecting someone."

The *tahsildar* retorted:

"That is so. . . . But I am quite sure that they know already about his return. . . . So it is better to warn him that the neighbourhood is unsafe."

"In the future you had better light the lantern, even if we do not expect anyone. That will baffle the inquisitive."

"Yes, it is a good idea."

Suddenly the sentry whispered:

"Captain . . . look there, about three hundred yards

away . . . by the side of that heap of stones . . . that rock, moving slowly."

Roberts and the *tahsildar* went up to the sentry-post. The Pathan soldier was not mistaken. A dark piece of rock moved along the ground. . . . It stopped for an instant then it went forward very slowly. The *tahsildar* exclaimed :

"Why . . . it's Bacha Ali. . . . Of course it is. He moved by degrees under the cover of a camel's skin. . . . An excellent method of locomotion by night without being seen. If he used this means by night it was because he had wind of the dangers that threatened him. I will go and warn the guard at the armoured door. . . ."

Roberts and the *tahsildar* went down one after the other. They did not have long to wait. A quarter of an hour later the messenger was safe and sound in Roberts' quarters. He was congratulated on his ruse. The camel-driver, with the skin still round him, chuckled quietly :

"Captain, this cloak"—he stroked the skin as if he was stroking the back of a faithful beast—"has saved my life many times. . . . By the grace of God, I have been disguised as a mountain rock. And one does not waste one's ammunition on blocks of stone."

"However, someone fired from the direction of Tundi Kana about one o'clock in the morning. Was it to welcome you? "

"Ha! ha! . . . Yes . . . two shots. . . . I walked in the open about a hundred yards along the track. . . . They made me lose a little blood from my wrist. . . . I thanked the Prophet for the warning and I quickly transformed myself into a stone."

"You have the wisdom of the old eagles of Daman-i-Koh! But your wrist is still bleeding. You must have it washed."

The camel-driver made a gesture of indifference. He did not pay any attention to a slight scratch like that. He began to give his report without further delay.

"Captain, I have spent a week with the Abza Kehl. The old *mulla* of Hatta Rogha has addressed the headmen of his district. He has great influence over them. I succeeded in hearing what he said to them after the evening prayers. The Abza Kehl are discontented. Their loyalty to Ramanoullah is sincere. If Hamdi Khan really means to attempt to gain the throne of Kabul with the secret support of your King-Emperor, the Abza Kehl will rise as one man. . . . That is as sure as that the scorpion's tail is venomous."

"But you know quite well that the King-Emperor does not intend to favour either the Emir de Kabul or Hamdi Khan. . . . We are strictly neutral."

Bacha Ali gave several little clicks with his tongue, which meant that he doubted this neutrality.

"Your country never abstains when its interest is at stake . . . why then should I be neutral when a friend who is useful to me is going to be threatened by an adversary? "

"You forget that the jackal, when he wants to frighten the lion, pretends to be the ally of another lion. Are you sure that Hamdi Khan does not boast that he is being aided by us in order to demoralize more easily the people of Kabul? "

The argument had its effect upon Bacha Ali.

"Perhaps what you say is quite true. Unfortunately

the effect of Hamdi Khan's plotting will make itself felt. Before two moons have waned, I think peace will have deserted the frontier."

Roberts told his *tahsildar* to note carefully the details of Bacha Ali's mission and sent his orderly to fetch his night field-glasses. He wanted to survey the neighbourhood from the roof of the fort. The orderly came back.

"Captain, I can't find your field-glasses."

Roberts went up and searched his room in vain. All of a sudden he remembered that Nicholson had borrowed them the night before to take with him on his round. He might have left them in his room.

In the absence of the lieutenant, he went to his room, as the door was open. He looked on the table by the bed where lay his Sam Browne belt, his service revolver, some staff cards. Some clothes hung on the wall along with a Kodak and a wicker-covered flask. . . . He went up to the table where some books were piled up near the lamp. He caught sight of a black strap. He moved some of the books and at last found his prismatic field-glasses. In taking them up he knocked down a yellow card—a photograph. It was the portrait of a woman. He picked it up again, not from curiosity, but so as not to leave the table untidy. He stuck it up. . . . And abruptly he snatched it up and took it to the lamp. His heart began to beat violently. He bent down to look at it more closely and recognized Alba. The portrait was signed simply with her name. On the left-hand corner he deciphered "NOMIKOS, artist-photographer, Cairo."

VIII

ROBERTS hurriedly returned to his room. The discovery that he had just made drove all other thoughts from his mind. The return of Bacha Ali, his disturbing news, the political situation less and less reassuring no longer existed, so far as he was concerned. Fort No. 4, the Afghan frontier, the tribes who surrounded it, did not count. Stretched, fully dressed, upon his bed, Roberts saw nothing but Alba's portrait on Nicholson's table. And infinite possibilities filled his imagination. What a whirl of thoughts upset him!

So Nicholson had known Alba in Cairo. The inevitable meeting. The British society, at Shepherd's, at the *Semiramis*, at Heliopolis, is not numerous.

It was fate that, one evening at a gala, they were introduced. He was attracted by her. And judging by the ideas of the young lieutenant, he seemed to treat his love affairs seriously. . . . A mutual love, most likely. . . . The fact that Alba had given him that beautiful signed photograph proved that she had not seen in their meeting one of those passing fancies which melt like a sorbet under the warmth of ephemeral madrigals.

His head hot, his hand icy, Roberts tried to reason logically, calmly. A difficult task. . . . The photograph,

taken at Cairo, different from the one he had, would keep coming into his mind. A torturing vision which banished all logic; an obsession which dispelled all balanced reasoning. He clenched his fists and tried to argue with himself:

"Come. . . . Let me be sensible. . . . He has spent three, four, five months maybe, there. . . . He has got to know her. . . . He has been attracted. . . . And she, too. . . . That is obvious. He has become her lover. . . . Why not, after all? She was bored. . . . She tried to forget. He has come into her life at the crucial moment. . . . So that is the reason of her silence. Here are the suspicions that I had, the other evening, absolutely confirmed. Her husband has not had to intercept my letters. She has received them all. She has ignored them. And why? Because this new passion monopolized her thoughts. It is irrefutable. . . . I was absolutely correct when I said to myself that our beautiful romance was dead so far as she was concerned, and that I was a fool to believe in her fidelity."

Roberts gave vent to a burst of sorrowful laughter.

"Ha! . . . And I, who fancied to myself that I was supplanted by a rich Egyptian. . . . She has not even done me this honour. . . . She has chosen a young subaltern. . . . She has been captivated by the youthful enthusiasm of this young boy! . . . And chance, to complete her kindness, has put me in touch with this boy, so that I should not lose anything of the grotesque comedy. . . . No letters. . . . No explanations. . . . No excuses. . . . But I find myself under the same roof as my successor. . . ."

Roberts sat on his bed, his face to the wall which

separated him from Nicholson. His will-power was at the end of its tether. He was no longer able to reason logically. Thoughts again whirled through his brain. He saw Nicholson at Cairo in a flower garden on the isle of Ghezireh, confessing his love to Alba, who listened to him readily; then Alba alone in her room finding in the mail an eight-page letter from her old lover. . . . She glanced over it before she tore it up carelessly and went to inhale the perfume of the roses that her new admirer had given her that morning. . . . He saw them with their arms around each other on the Nile, at night in the *dabieh* gliding gently down the sapphire surface of its placid stream. He pictured her little gestures that he knew so well. . . . A sudden spasm gripped his heart. . . . He was sure that Alba gave herself to another, whilst he, miserable exile, wept tears of blood in this wretched little room, in front of his little ebony table.

Then he jumped up from his bed and ran to the door. He was just going to open it when Nicholson called out from the passage :

“ Captain . . . I have finished my watch. . . . There is nothing to report.”

Like a wild beast let loose he wanted to throw open the door and seize Nicholson by the throat. But the human beast in him was still fettered by his duty, by his duty as officer in charge, by his Anglo-Saxon *sang-froid*, which, in the most tragic moments, is able to master instinct and overcome, in spite of everything, the worst passions. He drew back a few steps so as not to be tempted to turn the door handle, and replied quietly.:

“ All right. . . . Thank you.”

Nicholson's steps died away.

Roberts followed their direction with his eyes, as if he were able to see through the wall. Suddenly he gave a start. One would have thought that an invisible hand had just hit him full in the face. He had forgotten one thing in picturing the past! . . . One thing! He had forgotten that Alba and Nicholson had probably joked about his love episode! He imagined he could hear the confidences of the inconstant charmer to her new lover. "I knew another officer in your Indian army, dearest. He paid court to me. . . . Poor soul! He thought I was in love with him. He has written to me from time to time, but I have not even read his letters. . . ." Roberts imagined Alba with a cigarette in her mouth, reassuring Nicholson, who was jealous of her past. . . . Who knows! Why should she not have even shown his poor despairing letters?

That thought made him lose all self-control. He saw red. . . . Nicholson perhaps knew that Alba had scorned his captain. The awful thought turned Roberts' brain. . . . He stared at his revolver hanging up in its case. . . . Then he shut his eyes. He saw red no longer. Trembling he turned out the lamp, went on tip-toe to his bed and threw himself on the counterpane like a wounded animal.

The silence which reigned in the fort was broken by the tramp of feet in the courtyard. A squad of four men went to relieve the sentries in their armoured sentry-boxes.

The next day Nicholson marched out at the head of a reinforced *ghusht*. His object was to carry out a three-day patrol of the Ozid valley and to show the Abza Kehl

natives that the garrison at Fort No. 4 was not sleeping in a fool's paradise.

During his absence, Roberts, to distract his thoughts, inspected the outer defences of the fort and himself superintended the renovation of two gaps in the barbed wire entanglements. He had some more *chevaux de frise* made; two hundred sandbags filled, some dug-outs made in a hollow which, in case of need, could be occupied advantageously, for one could, with two Lewis guns, command the entrance of the Eagle Pass. He held frequent conversations with the *tahsildar*. He tried by every means possible to prevent himself thinking. He must at all costs dispel this gnawing obsession.

On the evening of the third day he dined alone; when his work was over, his haunting thoughts seized him, gripping him relentlessly, more insinuatingly than ever. Sudden tramping in the courtyard, the sound of the butt-ends of rifles on the ground, announced the return of the *ghusht*.

Soon he heard footsteps in the passage. Nicholson came in, covered with dust, his turban in his hand.

"Good evening, captain . . . we have just got back. I am going to take my tub and then I will report of the result of my expedition."

"I will wait for you."

The lieutenant went out. Roberts noticed that he went off quickly in spite of the three days he had spent in the mountains. He was surprised at the coolness and the apparent indifference with which he had received him. Could he possibly continue to master himself like this for long? . . . How long could he keep it up? What would be the limit of his resistance? . . . It would come

unexpectedly, like sudden sickness that nothing could stop. He thought:

"Those two . . . in Egypt! "

He jumped up from his chair. And in a vain hope of calming his nerves, he poured out a whisky into a glass and swallowed it at a gulp. Nicholson came back, a quarter of an hour later. Roberts looked at him in such a curious way that the lieutenant remarked:

"I see that you are keen to know the result of my round. . . . I will be quick and report my observations. . . . Boy! Bring the soup. . . ."

Roberts gave his fellow-officer an enigmatical look. The lieutenant read his gaze with curiosity. But this disquieting stare did not hide his hate or contempt or the most bitter irony.

"Captain, I have interrogated several chiefs of the Abza Kehl tribes. The upshot of my conversations with them is that Bacha Ali's information is perfectly correct. The *mullahs* of the district have been busily spreading the report for the last month that we are secretly supplying the followers of Hamdi Khan with arms and munitions. Of course these reports are accepted as absolute facts by all those who have heard them, and I am of opinion that we ought to inform Kohat and Peshawar about it. It is quite time that the High Commissioner takes steps to counteract this campaign. If these rumours are not stopped I foresee some nasty business before long. . . . I have also had a long conversation with the Marabout of Hattarogha. He said . . ."

"Ah well, sir, I don't care a damn about what has been told you at Hattarogha."

Roberts had listened to Nicholson, leaning back in his

chair, his arms folded, and a cold look in his eye. And as his captain's answer left the young officer flabbergasted, Roberts, measuring his words, repeated :

"Don't you understand? I am not going to worry about your patrol. We are at table. . . . Give me your report to-morrow. . . . For the moment I am much more interested in what you did when you were in Egypt, on leave."

Nicholson, in spite of Roberts' manner, thought that he was joking. The captain's odd behaviour had already struck him. He had looked upon him as an eccentric fellow, a very capable officer indeed, but strange and subject to inexplicable fits of ill-humour.

He pretended to smile and replied :

"You are pulling my leg, captain. . . . My leave doesn't interest you."

"No, really. . . . I should like to know what you did when you were in Cairo."

"I've told you that I spent my leave in Egypt because of my mother whose health is not very good."

"Yes. . . . You have told me that. . . . But you did not spend the entire five months doing nothing but nurse your mother? . . . You enjoyed yourself in Cairo."

"Certainly! I danced at Shepherd's. . . . I got to know some of the cosmopolitan crowd. . . . I had a fairly good time."

"Ladies? "

"Oh! "

"Well . . . a lady? "

"Captain, it is a subject that . . . which . . . in fact, it would be unseemly to talk about."

With a great effort of will, Roberts softened the tone

of his voice. He put his elbows on the table, faced Nicholson, and looked at him with a smile, trying to seem jovial.

"Come, Nicholson, we are not in a convent now . . . what the devil do you take me for—a Quaker? I myself have a good time when I'm on leave. . . . We are bachelors, after all!"

"Quite so."

"Admit it then, you have made some conquests."

"Conquests! No. . . . I became interested in one woman, yes."

"A young girl, a widow, a divorcée?"

"No . . . married."

"Ah! Ah! . . . That's dangerous, that . . ."

"Oh, yes, I know."

"After all, it depends upon . . . Did you carry your flirtation very far?"

"You know as well as I do, captain, that it would not be fair to say more."

"I am not being so indiscreet as to ask you her name. . . . We do not enter into personalities. I merely want to know if you were very much in love with the lady."

Nicholson hesitated. Then firmly:

"Very."

The simple adverb was like a blow on the heart to Roberts. He had great difficulty in maintaining his level tone of voice.

"And she?"

"What do you mean: And she?"

"I mean: Was she very much in love with you?"

Nicholson grew annoyed this time at Roberts' insistence. He exclaimed:

"Listen, captain, there are limits to the confidences of men, even when they are *tête-à-tête* and away from indiscreet listeners. . . . Hang it, one would think that my love affair was your concern."

"I ask you once more; was this married woman very much in love with you?"

"And I say again I shall not tell you."

Roberts sat up straight at Nicholson's determined tone of voice. His face hard, his jaw set, he looked at him without speaking. Then suddenly:

"You refuse to answer the question I ask you?"

"Didn't you say just now, captain, that we were at table? . . . For the moment we are not on service matters."

Nicholson's answer seemed to sting Roberts. He returned to the point.

"I am waiting for your answer."

"Quite useless. What I do on leave is nobody's business. . . . Have I failed in my duty to you as my superior officer? . . . No. . . . Then I beg of you, once and for all, captain, to stop questioning me on this subject. I have told you all that I decently can. We will not mention the matter any more. . . ."

"Ah! We will not mention the matter any more!"

Roberts got up. His anger nearly burst out. But once again he controlled himself in time. He picked up an old newspaper from the table, and in an almost normal tone of voice he exclaimed:

"You are quite right. To-morrow morning you will give me your detailed report of your patrol. Good night."

"Good night, captain."

IX

A THIN wooden partition now separated the two enemies. Or rather one man who felt his hate growing every day and another who, if he did not yet feel an aversion for his superior officer, looked upon him as half mad, with strange fancies, an unsociable fellow-soldier, sometimes an inquisitor, sometimes absolutely indifferent.

Roberts remembered one thing in his conversation with his lieutenant. Whatever the cause of this reticence, he had concealed the fact that he was interested in only one woman in Cairo. In plain language, that meant that he had been in love with Alba. He wanted to know if Alba, on her part, shared his love. The best way to find out was to watch Nicholson's correspondence. Not that Roberts had any intention of opening his letters. His jealousy could never lead him to such an act. But it would be enough if he were to see in the post an envelope coming from Egypt, addressed in Alba's handwriting, for the truth to be clear to him at last. If Alba wrote to him, the proof that their love was mutual would be complete.

Two days after their last conversation in the mess-room chance gave Roberts the proof he wished for and feared at the same time.

The captain and lieutenant had inspected in silence

the reserve of munitions kept in the cellars. The *subadar* had had the machine-guns out and tested their mechanism. Nicholson had noted that he had reminded the depot at Kohat to hasten the despatch of twenty boxes of grenades by the next food convoy, when the *tahsildar* reported :

“ Captain, the post has just come.”

Roberts, followed by his lieutenant, instantly went into the courtyard and saw the non-commissioned officer in charge of the post who was sorting the letters upon his little table at the side of the orderly room. The official despatches were piled up in the middle. On the right there were some unimportant envelopes addressed to Roberts. On the left two post cards and a letter forwarded on from England for Nicholson. Just as Roberts picked up his batch, the postman took up an oblong mauve envelope that he placed on the left. Roberts noticed at once that it had an Egyptian stamp. And also the rapidity with which Nicholson picked it up. He had recognized Alba's writing.

Now he was convinced. He hesitated. Then he saw his lieutenant go off in the direction of the western gate. He called out :

“ Nicholson! . . . Come to my quarters, I want to speak to you.”

Nicholson turned round, surprised.

“ To your quarters, captain? ”

“ Yes.”

And in order to give colour to this request in the eyes of the non-commissioned officers and the *tahsildar* who were present, he added, in as natural a tone as possible :

“ We had better draw up the wireless message for the munitions we need.”

They went up to the first floor. Nicholson, on the invitation of Roberts, was the first to enter the room. Roberts closed the door behind him and went up to the lieutenant:

"I did not ask you to come up here to talk about hand-grenades. You can send that message later on. . . ."

"Then, captain, I do not see any need of a conversation . . . our interviews are rather limited, and regarding my private affairs, I have already told you. . . ."

"Ah, well, my reply is that your private affairs interest me."

"I am honoured to learn that you are not indifferent to my private and personal affairs."

"No sarcasm if you please. . . . I am in no mood for joking. Listen, Nicholson, it is not the officer in charge of Fort No. 4 who is speaking to you now. . . . One star more or less on the shoulder does not count in this business. It is necessary. . . . You follow me . . . it is necessary that we come to an understanding as man to man. . . . You have just received a letter from Egypt."

"Certainly. . . . What about it?"

"Isn't that letter addressed to you by the woman whom you spoke about the other night?"

"What has that to do with you?"

Nicholson was so annoyed by Roberts' question that he stepped back a pace, while Roberts looked him up and down and continued:

"I am going to tell you what is in that letter. . . . It contains words of love, passionate protestations sent to you to console you in your exile."

"And so? . . . Does that annoy you?"

Roberts went close up to him. Lowering his voice he said :

"I will tell you the name of your correspondent: it is Mme. de Nogales."

Nicholson's astonishment was so great that words failed him. Then Roberts came once more to the attack :

"You see I am well informed. . . . I knew the other evening all that you did not want to tell me. Your reticence was of no use. At Cairo you were Mme. de Nogales' lover."

"That is untrue. And further, it seems to me that two men who have any self-respect do not give confidences when the honour of a woman is at stake. . . . My father when he was alive always taught me, sir, that when two gentlemen respect the laws of decency their first thought is to remain silent on the subject on which you wish me to speak."

"I don't want your lessons, Nicholson! We are not here in a club, we are *tête-à-tête*, face to face, two men who are speaking to one another without any witnesses, and who have the right to speak freely. . . . I want to know, and I will know, if you have been Mme. de Nogales' lover!"

"No."

"You still deny it. Ah, well, I challenge you to show me the letter to prove that I am not mistaken."

"Never."

Roberts took a step forward as though to spring on his fellow-officer, as if to take it by force and wrench from him the proof of his amour. The lieutenant stopped him with a look.

"Don't come any nearer, Roberts! . . . Take care what you are doing. . . ."

"That will do. Your attitude confirms my suspicions."

"And suppose, for a moment, your suspicions are correct? Do I have to give an account of my love affairs to you? You want to know? Is it not enough for you to know the name of the person I love? Very well, I will tell you the plain unvarnished truth. . . . It is true Mme. de Nogales reciprocated my love. When one is tied to a person like her husband, one has the right to love elsewhere. I shall defend her against the whole world, and I forbid anyone to misjudge her conduct. . . . If you start to interfere in my love affairs and reproach me for my behaviour and find fault with an unassailable woman, you make a great mistake, Roberts. . . . You have taken leave of your good sense. . . . Further, your attitude since I arrived here leads me to believe that solitude has turned your brain. . . . What is the meaning of this rôle of censor that you are trying to play on my account? . . . Even a tyrannical religious tutor does not begin by worrying the boy entrusted to his charge. . . . You have the right to question me as an officer, in the exercise of your duties. You have not the right to set yourself up as the judge of my affections."

"Nicholson . . ."

"Let me speak. . . . I am tired of your playing the part of a judge who delights in pushing his nose into other people's love affairs. . . . You asked me to dot my i's—very well. Mme. de Nogales has written to me that she loves me as much as I love her, and I am going to ask her to get a divorce so that I can offer her my name."

Nicholson's vehemence astonished Roberts. An

ominous silence followed. Then Roberts got up. His lieutenant's last phrase had stung him more than all the rest put together. With a sardonic smile and a voice ringing with fury, he replied scornfully:

"Congratulations. . . . You are going to marry my former mistress! "

"What is that you say? "

"I have spoken quite plainly, I think. . . . I have been the lover of this unapproachable woman. . . . Oh! pray be calm. . . . Now it is my turn, Nicholson. . . . I repeat, since this information seems to surprise you, I myself loved this lady who has doubtlessly been writing very tenderly in that letter that you keep so carefully in your pocket. You certainly should know some details. Since you are persuading a woman to divorce her husband in order that you may marry her, it is as well to find out with whom you are dealing. . . . And I mean to let you know. . . . Last year in London, during my five months' leave, I enjoyed a delightful idyll with her . . . and I also knew her husband, that captain of industry, who lives by cards. . . . Has he also twisted you for a few thousand pounds? Like you, I loved this woman. . . . Like you, I believed her to be faithful and honest. . . . What a burlesque! Only we are not quite in the same boat, because you . . . you have only had my leavings! . . ."

"It's false! . . . You lie! . . . You've invented all this because you're jealous . . . envious. . . ."

"You fool! Do you think I wanted to play the part of a censor with you, as you suggested? The Afghan sun hasn't given me sunstroke. You're wrong. . . . I have suffered terribly through this woman, and that is

the reason I asked you those insidious questions. . . . I wished to know at all costs. . . . I wanted to find out the reason of her silence. And you have given it to me. . . .”

“You may have been in love with Alba, but you have not been her lover! Spite is the reason of your boasting!”

“Spite? . . . Well look . . .”

Quickly Roberts took out his keys and bent down to open his dressing-case. He waved the portrait in Nicholson’s face and exclaimed wildly :

“And that, my boy. . . . What is it? . . . Her photograph, signed by her. . . . If she has given you one as well, draw your own conclusions. . . . She presented it to me one evening, in a supreme moment of love, in a burst of passion . . .”

“Be quiet!”

“Ha! Ha! . . . And yours too probably? It was not the same, but a repetition. . . . The surroundings only change. In my case, it was a small room in Belgravia. You, you have had the Pyramids as a setting. It is more romantic. So now that you are convinced, you ingenuous lover, do not forget to invite me to your wedding. I shall be able to give you some good advice that day.”

“If we were in mufti in London I would break your face.”

“And I would do the same with the greatest pleasure. . . . But in the meantime this private conversation is at an end, and from to-day we will have no communication beyond those absolutely necessary for service matters. You can go.”

That same afternoon Roberts was at work at his office when Nicholson, who had just inspected the drinking water, entered the cool little room. He took out of his pocket a large sheet of paper of the regulation size and handed it to Roberts.

"Captain, here is my request for a transfer for personal reasons. I shall be obliged if you will forward it as soon as possible to the Inspector-General of the Frontier Corps."

Roberts read the short wording of the request. Nicholson begged, without stating them, for personal reasons to be transferred to another detachment in the district.

Roberts took up his pen, at once wrote his approval and, without raising his head, he remarked icily:

"Your request shall be forwarded to-morrow with the post."

X

"I CAN'T bear to see this man any more. . . . He must go; if not I don't know what may happen. . . ."

Roberts' thoughts recommenced their mad whirl. The very presence of *the other* gave him no respite. He had found out what he wanted to know. The position was perfectly clear. This was all that remained of a delightful love episode. Bitterness. Disgust. Wounded pride. A terrible hatred against Destiny. Alba was still writing to the other. But he, Roberts, had been forgotten the day after his departure. Their passion, dead embers. His letters, futile phrases. His plaintive appeals, empty words.

"That man must go. . . ."

This secret desire worried Roberts. He made mental calculations what chances the request for a transfer had. It might be some days . . . some weeks . . . maybe. . . . Ah! never again to see this man who has known the savour of the kisses of the woman he had loved so dearly! Who could have told whether Alba's silence would have been definite if this new love had not come into her life? If it had not been for Nicholson, who had attracted her, she might perhaps, little by little, have come back to Roberts. She might have been influenced by constancy, by the force of her passion. The arrival of Nicholson had changed the whole course of his life. And the man was there. The implacable rigour of discipline forced daily contact with him.

When Roberts was not cursing the cruelty of a destiny that was indifferent to his grief, he recalled for the tenth time the remarks exchanged in the course of that dramatic interview. The wildest suppositions passed through his mind, one after another. . . . Was Alba sincere? Or was she, after all, the willing accomplice of a clever crook who used the beauty of his wife to force her lovers to play and cunningly get out of them his livelihood? . . . Hardly had he formed the idea when the thought seemed to him sacrilegious. The cleverest actress could not, for months, have played this difficult rôle to him. She had shown him emotions, charming and spontaneous gestures which could not be acted. . . . A courtesan very soon reveals her mercenary spirit. The tenderness of Alba's affections had clearly shown that it was not that. Alba did not sow kisses in order to reap riches.

As he defended, in spite of himself, the memory of his dead love, Roberts also regretted the harsh words that he had thrown in his rival's face. He regretted, above everything, having spoken. . . . Carried away by his anger he had given away his secret. . . . In order to make another suffer, as he had done, he had scoffed the only woman he had loved in all his life . . . unseemly retaliations, coarse words, that should never have passed his lips. Was it possible that his mental sufferings had blunted his reason so that he could indulge in this petty spite!

From time to time he held his head between his hands and asked himself with the despair of a madman who feels his reason leaving him . . . do I love her still, in spite of her obstinate silence, in spite of her indifference? I must know, I must fathom my own mind. . . . I must answer straightforwardly the following question: If, by

a miracle, she were now to appear before me, smiling as before, should I say to her: God I hate the sight of you. . . . You fill me with disgust, with contempt. . . . Should I persist in seeing, in her beautiful velvety eyes, the reflection of the face of *the other*?

Would her arms show indelible traces of the kisses of *the other*? If she came and offered herself to me should I horsewhip that skin, punish it for its treachery? No! . . . I should not be able to express my hate to her face! I could not loathe her. . . . I could not drag in the mud what I have adored. . . . Unpardonable weakness! . . . I ought to tell her to go back to *the other*, but as a matter of fact, I should be only too glad to take her again in my arms.

To take her again! . . . Why, I must be mad. . . . Why, I'm only a coward. . . . No one could take back a woman who had behaved in such a way. . . .

Roberts cross-questioned himself in vain. He got no reply. He had loved too deeply. He still loved Alba too much to criticize himself with cool judgment. His jealousy, above all, carried him away, and his hatred of Nicholson prevented him from coming to a reasonable conclusion. . . . The leitmotiv of his meditations returned to him continually and inexorably, deluding him:

"This man must go. . . ."

Nine days after the sending of the request backed by Roberts, the reply came, sent by wireless. The message was brought to him in the orderly room:

"Captain Adjutant Major Henderson to the Captain
Commanding Fort No. 4.

"I have the honour to inform you that the request for

transference, put in by Lieutenant Nicholson, cannot be complied with at present. All transfers and also all leave are suspended in north-western districts. You will receive to-morrow a cipher message, by telegram, giving you instructions from the Inspector-General of the Frontier division for the immediate application of plan 14. According to the latest information sent out by the High Commissioner of Peshawar a general rising of the Waziris is imminent. This morning at five o'clock the first shots have been fired in the Khyber Pass near Landi Kana."

Roberts' hopes were dashed. He was re-reading the message when Nicholson, who had just come back from a twelve-hour patrol, came into the orderly room. Without a word Roberts showed him the message. Nicholson, in spite of himself, exclaimed:

"The transfer is granted?"

"Read."

His disappointment was reflected in the hard look that came into his face. He threw the message on the table.

"I ought to have put in my request sooner."

"Certainly."

"In the meantime, things are getting warm."

"Before the end of the week I expect these ragamuffins will have attacked us."

"Listen to me. . . . We are two white men alone here. . . . I just wish to know, in case I should be killed, if I can rely on you to forward a last letter that I shall carry on me addressed to . . ."

The lieutenant hesitated. Roberts helped him out icily:

"A letter addressed to your mother? . . . Yes."

"No . . . to Mme. de Nogales."

"Then do not rely on me."

"That is final? "

"Absolutely. . . . If I am killed I expect nothing from you. If the Abza Kehls get you don't expect anything from me."

Nicholson, in the face of Roberts' resolution, did not insist. Then suddenly turning on his heel he added :

"If there is a fight and we have to remain here I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you fall first."

"Thanks . . . after you, if there are any bullets left."

The next morning the orders announced by the staff-major of Kohat reached the commander of the fort. They ordered him to adopt all precautions mentioned in plan 14, to prepare for a general attack, to reinforce the defences of the fortress; to send pickets with machine-guns to the advance posts; to detail, at once, to Blockhouse 9, which commanded the entrance to the Ozid valley, a half-company with food and ammunition.

Roberts was drawing up his orders when the *subadar* came in to see him.

"Captain, what have you decided about the convoy which is due to leave to-morrow with despatches? "

"The convoy will not leave."

"The postman has a very urgent letter that Lieutenant Nicholson has handed to him this morning. He has even told him specially to see that the mail is sure to be sent."

"Does he want to send an official message? That would surprise me, because he has submitted nothing to me for the authorities at Kohat."

"No, captain. I think it is some private correspondence."

"Very well. When Lieutenant Nicholson comes back from Blockhouse 9, tell him to come and see me."

"Yes, captain."

The *sabadar* went out. He met the lieutenant at the entrance to the fort. He was inspecting arms.

"Lieutenant, will you go and see the captain?"

"What for?"

"He wants to speak to you about to-morrow's convoy."

"Very well. I'll go."

Nicholson went to the orderly room and saluted formally. Roberts pointed to the bag that the postman had just brought to him, containing some letters written by some of the Pathans to their relations in the plains. Amongst them was a white envelope addressed to Mme. de Nogales at Cairo. Roberts picked up the letter and handed it to Nicholson with the blunt remark:

"You can take that. The convoy will not leave to-morrow."

Nicholson jumped up, astonished and enraged.

"What! You are stopping the convoy?"

"Yes."

"Ah! . . . I understand; you want to prevent me from writing to her. You have hit upon an absurd way of delaying my letters."

Roberts looked at his fellow-officer.

"Then you imagine I am going to risk the lives of our men in going through the passes merely to give you the pleasure of being sure that your *billets-doux* are despatched? Do you expect me to massacre fifty men in order that your beautiful lady friend in Cairo can read a little

sooner your protestations of love? You are out of your mind."

"Enough of this hypocrisy. If you were in my place, if you were loved, you would not consider the lives of your subordinates. This grand idea of strict duty is put on just to annoy me."

"You've no right to say that. . . . You don't understand that this is a critical moment, and that we shall need all our men, and that I am only doing my duty as officer in charge of this station in limiting, from now, any risk of unnecessary losses."

"Then I'll send a message by wireless."

"I officially forbid you to use the wireless for private correspondence. . . . Really, passion seems to be turning your head. . . . Tch! . . . Hark."

The two officers listened attentively. They just caught the sound of two shots a long way off.

"The Abza Kehl? "

"No, the Zirram tribe."

"Have you run a telephone wire between Blockhouse 9 and ourselves? "

"Yes. It was put in order this morning. The line is laid underground."

There was a violent ringing. The telephone operator in the next room called out:

"Captain! . . . Post No. 9 wants you."

Roberts got up. Five minutes later he came back into the orderly room. With a sarcastic smile he remarked:

"That's it. The attack on us has begun. . . . Regret not to be able to send the post to oblige you. You can put your letter in a drawer. It will arrive in six months; that is, if it ever leaves."

XI

THEY are fighting again the entire North-West Frontier.

For eighty years, ever since John Bull took over from the Sikhs the duty of guarding the approach to India by the Khyber Pass, a state of war has been a chronic evil in this district.

The barrier of the Suleiman mountains, those high and jagged red walls, have, for three thousand years, been unperturbed witnesses of slaughter, ambushes, invasions, guerrilla wars and tragic retreats. The warriors of Alexander the Great died on the same tracks where later the Scythian archers fell. The Hun cavalry, the Turkomen, future grand Moguls, and the soldiers of His Britannic Majesty, from the Victorian era to the present day.

The operations around Kabul during the Afghan wars, the retreat from Kandahar, reminiscences heroic and sorrowful, are memories that one does not forget in the mess of the regiments stationed between the Indus and the frontier. Peace reigns. A precarious peace at the mercy of the fanaticism of an influential *mulla*. Then, suddenly, to the cries of the *Allah ho Akhbar*, God is great, the *mulla* galvanizes the Mussulmans, stimulates their vindictiveness and arms them with rifles, persuad-

ing them that their bodies are proof against the bullets of the infidels.

There was fighting now from the Khyber to Quetta. The whole frontier re-echoed with the rhythm of machine-guns and the firing of salvoes. The symphony of death had for its setting a background of mountains across which Wagner would have loved to see his wild walkyries ride. Fort No. 4 was now held by two relief battalions under the command of a colonel. Roberts and Nicholson, with their men, had received orders to go and occupy Block-house 9.

It is a kind of redoubt perched on the mountain side; very difficult to hold, because its northern flank is exposed to rifle fire. The sandbags form but a slight protection against the gun-fire from above; from a hidden enemy scattered five hundred yards away on the ledges of rocks, regular eagles' nests, which afford them safe shelter.

For a fortnight the two officers had been on watch, turn by turn. It was their business to harass the movement of any tribes who attempted to surround Fort No. 4. They had water and food for sixty days, and ammunition for three months. The chances of receiving fresh supplies were nil; because the defenders of Fort No. 4 were closely watched by the enemy, and any body of men risking themselves in the open country would be mowed down.

It was the evening of the sixteenth day; Roberts and Nicholson, who had suffered the loss of ten dead and fifteen wounded of their small garrison, were eating bully beef and biscuit washed down with whisky and warm water. Their meals were eaten in silence. They only spoke when service needs demanded. They gave their minds to their doubts and hopes, bred of their precarious

position, which was full of danger. What would to-morrow bring forth?

They lived in the atmosphere of peril, like two automata, each scrupulously doing his duty. But they have a double. And their double is composed of fierce hatred, of the ill that they wish each other, of their bitter jealousy which, out of all reason, torments them like an ungovernable fury. Roberts' jealousy is, above all, sharpened by the deception that his comrade personifies. Left alone, he would have forgotten, for a time, the obsession of this overpowering spleen. His *tête-à-tête* with Nicholson brought back, every day, the joys of the past, his vanished happiness, his dead hopes. It was slow torture, continually renewed, conceived by a destiny even more cruel than an Asiatic executioner, a torture which would soon break down his resistance to his mad impulses. They eat. Face to face in the twilight. Badly shaven. Their clothes dusty, their faces haggard and worn by fatigue and anxiety and the uncertainty of their fate. They divide their biscuits that are rationed in order to hold out as long as possible. In their behaviour they are like brothers in arms, but in their inscrutable looks they are like deadly enemies.

The *subadar*, who devoured his *choupatis* with the non-commissioned officers, never suspected, down in his corner, the silent drama that the two officers dumbly played in their minds.

"We have drinking water for sixty days," said Roberts. "If we are surrounded it will be necessary next week to reduce the consumption to a quart a day."

"So much the better. . . . We shall die of thirst. . . . I shall hold out a little longer than you."

The tone of the conversation became subdued. A flash of intense hatred lit up Roberts' tired eyes.

"My word. . . . Your letter won't go for some time—eh!"

"I am not asking anything from you."

"But I dare say someone will be worrying at Cairo. . . ."

"Oh, shut up."

"Unless she is consoling herself with someone else? . . . Well, she's given to that sort of thing."

"Damn you!"

Their dialogue was only an exchange of whispered words, punctuated here and there with a distant shot.

"If you get through you will have to hurry up and marry her. . . . She won't wait, you know."

"Roberts, you are nothing but a coward. . . ."

Suddenly the Indian non-commissioned officer who worked the telephone at Fort No. 4 came from his dug-out where the telephone was hidden and ran up to the two officers.

"Captain . . . I have rung up the fort, but can't get an answer. . . ."

"The 'phone is out of order?"

"No. . . . I'm afraid the line has been cut. . . . They must have discovered the lay. . . . Digging up the earth they have ended by finding the wire and cut it."

Alarming news. All communication by patrol with the fort is impossible. The isolation of the blockhouse was complete.

The non-commissioned officer goes back to the dug-out. Roberts looks at Nicholson, gets up with tin mug and plate:

" No luck. . . . I was going to offer to let you telephone to Cairo! "

Then he goes to his shelter. But he has forgotten something and comes towards Nicholson :

" I shall be on duty to-night until two o'clock in the morning. You will relieve me from two to nine o'clock. . . . "

" Yes. "

" Are the sandbags enough protection for the men on the exposed corner down there on the left? "

" No. Three Pathans behind the parapet have been hit. We must reinforce them. "

" I will see to that myself to-night. "

One o'clock in the morning. Roberts has carefully inspected again all the details of the defence. His block-house, almost knocked to bits, is by no means an ideal spot to repel the attacks of a determined enemy. He has been able to realize once more the dangers of his position, especially since the breakdown of telephonic communication with Fort No. 4. . . . Four kilometres separate them. It is too far away to be properly protected by the few mountain guns with which the fort is equipped. Besides, the lie of the land does not allow even an indirect fire which could, in case of need, paralyse a general attack against the blockhouse.

Further, sentries have informed him, almost every night, of the passage of armed natives, who, under cover of the darkness, have slipped past towards the fort. These Pathans have extraordinary sight and can see in the dark like cats. It seems then that the main attack of the evening will be centred upon Fort No. 4, the key to the Ozid

valley. The *subadar*, however, has made no secret of his fears. He has warned Roberts that the investment of the fort is certain, the Abza Kehl, hidden in all the nooks and crannies of the hills, will not be imprudent enough to give battle before they have taken the blockhouse.

"Captain, let us take advantage of the short respite. If some strong reinforcements do not come from Kohat, in a fortnight or three weeks, we shall be wiped out; with the blockhouse destroyed the position of the defenders of the fort will be precarious. . . . Bacha Ali ought to rejoin us to-night. He will give us an idea of what is happening."

At two o'clock in the morning, Nicholson, sharp on time, came up to the parapet. He saluted Roberts and said simply:

"I have come to relieve you. . . . Has anything happened?"

"Nothing."

"Bacha Ali has not returned?"

"No. As soon as he does, wake me, I want to know what he has found out."

"I will have you called."

Roberts returns to his quarters, with its camp bed and its flies and scorpions. He has had to reduce his baggage to a minimum. But during the fortnight that he has been stationed in the blockhouse with his men he has not had time to think about the relative comfort of Fort No. 4. . . . It is necessary in the first place to hold on, for the investment may be long. Above all, his duty is to take care of his little garrison. Every Pathan who falls from the shot of a sniper's rifle is one rifle less to put up against imminent assaults. He is aroused from his first sleep by a call from the *subadar*:

"Captain, Bacha Ali has just got back."

"Bring him here."

The *subadar* returned with his valuable informer. Roberts gave him a friendly greeting. The camel-driver, with his white teeth, begins to give the latest news. Since the telephone line has been cut, the defenders of the blockhouse are ignorant of the general situation.

"I am glad to see you safe and sound within our walls, Bacha Ali. God has protected you again. . . ."

"Yes, captain. . . . By the grace of Allah. . . ."

"Good news?"

"Bad. . . . Very bad. . . . Your King-Emperor will find it difficult to win. . . . Abou el Heidja has just offered to let his tribes fight under the standard of the Emir of Kabul. . . . You know what that means? . . . From Kandahar to the frontier Abou el Heidja controls thirty thousand men, and half of them are well equipped with rifles and ammunition. . . . They have sworn to make a cross on the stomach of every infidel who falls, dead or alive, into their hands. You know how they make the sign of the cross on the body of a Christian? With the handjar, they rip the stomach from top to bottom and then from one side to the other. One! Two! . . . It's done. . . . And then the victim is left like a burst shell, his inside open to the sun, to call upon his God. . . . The followers of the Emir and of Abou el Heidja have another method of dealing with the unbelieving followers of Hamdi Khan. . . . They are bound, hung up by their feet and plunged one by one head-first into a tub of boiling oil. . . . They look as though they were souffled like a human fritter."

Bacha Ali seemed to delight in the details of his

tortures. He dwelt upon them all like a loving connoisseur who thoroughly appreciates the refinement of cleverly conceived tortures. He even chuckled devilishly when he added :

"I am not angry at the decision of Abou el Heidja. . . . Three years ago they made my poor and greatly beloved brother suffer like that. . . . A nameless crime. . . . If, then, I serve your country, it is not for the money I receive, it is to take my revenge, against the hired assassins of Abou el Heidja. My poor brother had not killed anyone; their vengeance was horrible. . . . They killed him as a hostage. . . . He, an innocent man. . . . May their souls rot in pig's filth to the end of time. . . . Ha! Ha! . . . Captain, the day I see their first prisoner plunge slowly into the tub, the day I hear the sizzling of his face going into the boiling oil, that day I shall thank God for his mercies. . . ."

"You make me sick, Bacha Ali."

"Ah! Captain. . . . You do not understand. . . . I have some other bad news to tell you. . . . It is a great secret that I found out by a providential chance. It seems that the Russians have sent twelve batteries of field artillery to the Emir of Kabul, with skilled gunners to work the guns. They say that the Emir has paid, in solid gold, for forty thousand shells. So don't be astonished if in two weeks time you hear Russian shells whistling over your head."

That piece of information is more important to Roberts than all the rest. Torture is the money currency among the Afghan tribes. He knows what the wretched wounded are liable to, who fall and are abandoned on the other side of the frontier. But the arrival of field artillery,

worked by Bolsheviks in the service of the Emir, is news of serious import. Four field guns are placed ready to fire at the mouth of the valley, and in half a day his blockhouse, already tottering, will be nothing more than a heap of ruins.

"Bachi Ali, your information, even if it is not accurate or premature, is of very great importance. It is absolutely necessary to communicate to the fort. . . ."

"To the fort? . . . Not easy, captain. . . . It is almost invested."

"If you make a detour round the Cow's Head. . . . The mountain up there is not occupied. You could descend by the Zirram track and, going east, you would have a good chance of reaching the fort without very great danger."

Bacha Ali pondered. He calculated the risks of the undertaking.

"I can climb up to-night to the top of the Cow's Head. I can hide there all day to-morrow, and at sundown I can start off again. . . . Only, the Abza Kehl are worming their way along the eastern track. . . ."

"Listen. . . . The colonel commanding the fort will give you a hundred silver rupees as payment for your mission. I am going to entrust you with a message . . ."

Bachi Ali hesitates. Roberts insists.

"And besides, it is not for the hundred rupees you aid us. It is to help us to get the best of those bandits of Abou el Heidja; to mow them down by thousands and to leave their cursed carcasses for the vultures to feed on. . . . *That*, Bacha Ali, is worth more than all the gold of Nizam and all the treasures of the Punjab put together."

The Afghan's eyes shine. Roberts has said the right

thing. The camel-driver sees hecatombs of his enemies mown down by English machine-guns; he imagines already the bodies of his brother's assassins, scattered here and there without burial, pecked by the hooked beaks of greedy carrion, torn by savage dogs. . . . His mind is made up.

"You can count upon me, captain. . . . They must die like dirty beasts and their entrails must be eaten by pigs. . . . Give me your message for the fort."

XII

THE battle has begun. The reinforcements of the Indian Army are on the march. The whole North-Western Army Corps is on a war footing. The divisions from Lahore and Meerut, also mobilized, are gradually making their way towards Nowshera, Peshawar and Quetta.

But Fort No. 4 is completely invested and Blockhouse 9 is surrounded on all sides. Roberts' little garrison consists of no more than sixty men. Some are in reserve behind the walls of his blockhouse. Others occupy the trenches that have been hurriedly dug, leading to the dug-outs. The preparation for an eventual bombardment. The wounded are cared for as well as possible by the young doctor, an acting major in the Indian Medical Service in the shell-proof dug-out, where they are sheltered from the burning sun and projectiles.

Roberts and Nicholson, with their unshaven chins, look like two ship-wrecked mariners. One cannot afford water to wash. One must think first of the wounded. Then the drinking water.

The two rivals do not any longer challenge each other in words. No more angry remarks . . . or bitter sarcasm. . . . Their hatred is suppressed. Western things count no longer. Yesterday's quarrels, really so recent, now seem like old stories of another world. . . .

The struggle for life, in the face of these tribes eager to kill, overrides everything. It is necessary to hold out at any cost, for the honour of the flag. Sometimes, when a bullet grazes Roberts, a ferocious thought flashes through his mind. . . . "If he had been able to stop it." Nicholson the other evening had had his coat sleeve pierced by a bullet which flattened itself on the mortar on the wall behind him. He examined the hole in his khaki, and at the same moment the cruel indifference of Roberts' remark rung once more in his ears:

"Congratulations! . . . You will marry my old mistress!"

If Nicholson had been able to perform such a miracle by a simple effort of will he would have made the bullet ricochet on to Roberts' head. For some minutes his subconsciousness made him forget the present position and suddenly reminded him of the bitter words that had passed between them that evening. . . . "Your irreproachable wife has already been mine! You are only taking my leavings. . . ."

An unexpected event has occurred. Four shells have just burst, five hundred yards from their trench. A surprise for the Pathans, a happening foreseen by the two officers, who had known, for some time, Bacha Ali's news.

Roberts had just looked through his field-glasses. He glanced at Nicholson at his side.

"This time it's business!"

Nicholson replied without turning his head:

"The blighters are trying to get the range. . . ."

"Bah! . . . Child's play. . . . You should have been through a barrage in the Great War, on the Somme or at Ypres. . . ."

Four more shells burst a little nearer. Then some others drop in the little courtyard inside the blockhouse. The bombardment continues for twenty minutes. Thirty men have been hit. Part of the wall is broken. The work of destruction has begun. By night-fall part of the blockhouse is demolished.

The orders from the colonel at the fort, brought by Bacha Ali, contain, among other instructions:

“On the night of the 8th instant, about three o'clock in the morning, you will see a white rocket fired; you will send out a sortie led by Lieutenant Nicholson. The object of the sortie will be: (1) To cause alarm among the tribes that are besieging us and are unaware of the strength of your garrison. (2) To inflict upon them the greatest possible losses. (3) To allow me to take advantage of the confusion of the besiegers on the north-west of the fort to make hasty reparation of my defences on that side. A raid of twelve hours will be long enough for the time being. When his object is achieved, Lieutenant Nicholson must withdraw to the blockhouse. It will devolve upon you to make the necessary plans so that this sortie may achieve its object without endangering your position.”

On the 8th, at three o'clock in the morning, after the enemy had ceased firing at dusk the previous evening, Nicholson, with his hundred Pathans, keen and pleased to climb the mountain to carry on their favourite guerrilla warfare, was waiting for the arranged signal. Roberts and the *subadar*, who knew all the paths leading to the fort, explained to him the route to follow so as to pass unnoticed by the besiegers and carry out the perilous raid with the best possible chance of success.

The night was dark and propitious to their expedition. All of a sudden, a star shone out in the direction of the fort.

"The rocket . . ." said Roberts. "You can start."

Without a look, without a word, Nicholson marches out at the head of his men in Indian file. Two hours later Roberts was called by his *subadar*.

"Captain, the man who keeps in touch with the column has just arrived. They have not sustained a shot and are now within a mile of the fort. They have got round a body of the Abza Kehl lying in wait there. Everything is all right. I thought you would be glad to know that Lieutenant Nicholson has succeeded in his mission, so far."

"Yes. . . . Yes . . . very glad to know . . . very glad."

The morning passed without incidents. The demolished parts of the blockhouse had been repaired under shelter. From the principal casemate, Roberts had had a small communication trench dug by which one was able to reach the defence trench. Towards four o'clock in the afternoon, the intermittent firing in the valley became more incessant. Then the crescendo of the fusillade increased, intensified every now and then by the mournful stuttering of the machine-guns. Roberts knew that Nicholson's raid was in the height of its action. He had just lit his pipe, listening intently, while the rifles pattered on, down there; a sudden thought flashed through his mind. . . . Suppose Nicholson were killed by one of those shots? The relative quiet of his sector led him to meditate. He asked himself: honestly, looking squarely at his conscience, would he be the least bit sorry if, on their return from the raid, the Pathans announced to him that

their officer had been killed? Would he be touched, in spite of everything, by the disappearance of this comrade in arms? Of this fellow-officer who had shared his privations? Of the man who wore the same uniform as himself, who defended the same flag?

He asked himself mentally the question. . . . But between the present happenings and the reply there was a shadow which returned without ceasing. The camera men try to show their phenomena by means of super-impressions. Some illusion tricks our optic nerve into materializing the thoughts which the human mind hides like a sealed book. In this instance Roberts followed the same process on the screen of his mind. . . . Upon Nicholson's life, the memory of Alba super-imposed itself. And Roberts at that moment understood that the least that he was able to reply to his secret question, was that he was as indifferent to the fate of his lieutenant as to that of a rebel hiding in the mountains. *Tête-à-tête* with his conscience, he realized this horrible truth: One can hate a man of one's own race, one can wish for the death of a brother in arms, and one can fire without hatred, like a machine, on humans that one does not know, against whom one has no cause of enmity. He had already realized *that*, during the Great War. Germans, French and English had ended up by killing one another on the Western front, after three years of hostilities, by reason of a wartime psychosis which had nothing in common with a definite hate. Held in the terrible vice of discipline which forbade one to think, these civilized peoples, facing each other, sowed death by command, not by conviction. The eager souls of the first hour who had thrown themselves into the *mêlée* to assist in the slaughter, "keen and

joyful ”; enthusiasts who charged in white gloves, splendid heroes who gave way to the mercenaries of Death, who killed in order not to be killed!

Very often in these trenches on the Yser or before Arras, Sub-Lieutenant Roberts, taking a rifle from one of the men to show his skill as a shot, asked himself after having been sure that he had picked off a fool-hardy German:

Why did I do that? That brave fellow over there is not my enemy and has never tried to harm me or to make me suffer. However, he would have killed me if I had shown my head, because we are both of us held by the irresistible wheel. If he and I, guided mutually by good sense, had laid down our arms straight away and had avowed, he in returning to Berlin and I to London, that we had had enough of firing at each other for nothing, we should have been executed in our turn by our own fellow-soldiers, condemned by our countrymen, our judges, who would have us killed in order to teach us to want to kill. . . .

It is the appalling imbecility of war between armed nations. Formerly kings had personal quarrels which they settled by making their mercenaries fight, paid to kill each other. It was perfectly logical. Since the appearance of the sacrosanct *Demon-Kraxis* which Kipling speaks of, there are no more personal quarrels. For economic or financial motives, more or less plausible, and to which twenty millions of combatants are perfectly indifferent, the powers that be, by means of the Press, the most potent poison in the modern world, since it poisons the opinion of hundreds of millions of men, make whole nations rise in arms and hurl themselves one against the other. And

the result is that I find myself in front of a stranger, rigged out in a different uniform from mine, a stranger that it is my duty to kill, when normally I should find him very sympathetic, and I should have a much stronger reason to kill Smith who tried to ruin me before the war or to see Brown fall, who was my superior officer and used to annoy me. If, at that time, Roberts, who was only a subaltern and was not in love, had found, in a shell-hole, a man who had stolen the love of his adored one, he would have killed that man, no matter whether he was dressed in khaki or field grey, with the grim joy of vengeance satisfied. One day, however, in a shell-hole full of liquid mud, he had come face to face with a German. The revolver of the one or the hand-grenade of the other could have talked. As a matter of fact, Roberts and the Bavarian non-commissioned officer helped each other. Ragged, smothered in mud, poor hungry wretches, thirsty, feverish, they looked at one another with their tired eyes with the same expression of grief and pity mingled in mutual despair. Then one said :

“ Vedomter krieg! ”

The other replied :

“ Damn this war.”

Roberts went on smoking. The rattle of musketry continuing with its deadly staccato, echoed and re-echoed through the red mountains. He still pondered.

“ Why war? Is there not, then, in each nation, among the sons of the same race, enough incentive to enmity, enough well-known crimes, enough unknown vengeance, to satisfy this Moloch with its blood-stained jowl? ”

He thought he saw, striding over the dead, like an unchained Titan, the monster on the watch, its face lit up

by two red eyes chuckling over the future hecatombs. Then the vision vanished, and over there, in the halo of the setting sun, he perceived with astonishment the face of Alba, enormous in size, just as she looked in the photograph taken at Cairo. It was no longer the grin of the giant, but the haughty smile of a woman who scorns a foolish love, who looks with supreme contempt at the poor man who has believed in her. Then his amour-propre wounded, his sentiment scoffed at, the voluptuous souvenir, the tragic deception, all mingled in Roberts' broken heart. He bore *the other* a terrible grudge. He felt resentment towards him as if, in the height of passion, Alba had deceived him. He felt even more than that, perhaps. Over there he would have been able to defend himself, to fight against an absolute abandonment. The drama was being played while he, Roberts, alone in his fort, wrote futile, even humiliating letters expressing the despair of his broken heart.

Then, in the smoke of his pipe, as it rose from the calcined bole, he envisaged callously, without any regret, Nicholson's death. If it was the will of fate that he was to fall during the raid, let fate do its worst. The end of the fortunate rival would be accepted by Roberts with indifference. In respect of the human race he pretended to believe it was only indifference, but in the depths of his conscience there was a real satisfaction.

The night had come. Nobody had returned. The *subadar* who was on duty in the trench, slid along the communicating passage and came to find Roberts.

"Captain, this delay is unusual. The diversion by the column is over."

" Yes. They ought to have returned by this."

The *subadar* hesitated, then he suggested :

" Suppose we send a patrol to search for them."

Roberts looked at his subaltern.

" How many men? "

" Twenty, perhaps. . . ."

" Are you mad? . . . Do you think that we have too many to hold this position? Do you want to send a party of my men to certain death, to deplete my trench and leave it undefended when to-morrow maybe there will be an attack on the blockhouse? . . . We hold at bay two or three thousand of the Abza Kehl who would turn their batteries upon the fort. They are reserving their shells in the hope of wiping us out at one blow, and then they expect to bombard heavily the fort with their stock of ammunition. . . . No, we really cannot do anything for this raiding party. . . ."

Roberts' arguments were just. They must wait. Their delay might be caused by the carrying in the wounded on the men's backs. Towards eleven o'clock in the evening the *subadar* accompanied his chief on his rounds, when one of the men on the machine-gun which protected the slope, came with news.

" A wounded man is crawling slowly towards us! "

They sent to fetch him. As soon as he was brought in and laid down in the casemate, the acting surgeon-major stated that his leg was broken. In spite of the fever he insisted on speaking at once to the officer in charge of the blockhouse. Roberts and the *subadar* went to him. They were eager to know what had become of the raiding party.

" Captain . . . we fired into the rear of the rebels.

Ah! . . . It was fine, captain! . . . But on the way back . . . bad . . . bad for us. . . . Little by little we got surrounded. . . . Mahmoud and Mudamir were shot down alongside of me, a mile away from here. . . ."

The wounded man sighed deeply to take breath, and then continued in a low voice :

"As for myself, I got a bullet in the leg coming down the Cow's Head. . . . I had only one fear. . . . Not to be able to get back. . . ."

"They finish off the wounded, of course."

The Pathan made a gesture full of meaning. He finished with :

"Abou el Heidja's men know how to do the business! "

Roberts was silent. At last he asked :

"And Lieutenant Nicholson? "

"Not seen him for six hours, captain. . . . We protected the column on the left with Sergeant Zangi Khan. I don't know what has become of the lieutenant."

Roberts went out with the *subadar*, while the man had his wounds attended to. The native officer seemed anxious.

"Provided that they have not killed Lieutenant Nicholson. . . . These bandits have an eye for marking down the officers of the column."

"What makes you think he has been killed? . . . He will come back to-night with the survivors of the raid."

"Pray God, captain."

Two hours went by. The men on duty peer in vain into the darkness. They could see nobody. Roberts came to relieve the *subadar*, who showed signs of increasing anxiety.

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"It is not possible that this wounded man is the only survivor. . . ."

"No. . . . Besides, listen. . . . Unless I am mistaken here are some of them coming back."

Roberts had a quick ear. One by one, separated by about a hundred yards, twenty Pathans crawled stealthily back to the wall and reached the blockhouse. They were not wounded; among them there was a non-commissioned officer who was in a great hurry to make his report.

"Captain, I bring in the only survivors. . . . We have been decimated on our return. . . . What a retreat! . . . How we escaped was a miracle. . . . I regret to report that Lieutenant Nicholson was wounded not far from me, about eight o'clock this evening. . . . A bullet in the chest. . . . We carried him five hundred yards . . . then two of our men fell, one after the other. . . . I wanted to take him on my back. . . . He ordered me to leave him there, to collect together the survivors and get back with them under cover of the night, because at daybreak we should be all mown down by the enemy who were lying in wait. I did not want to obey. . . . The lieutenant said to me: 'That is my official order. . . . Start off! . . .'"

Roberts and the *subadar* hung on the words of the Pathan.

"And then?"

"Then we started off. . . . But we had to make a long detour to the north of the Cow's Head because we had fallen into a nest of rebels. . . . Captain . . ." The voice of the Pathan dropped very low. . . . He added: "I would not have obeyed . . . because . . . my comrade Rostan had seen in the darkness two Abza Kehl

mutilating a wounded man. . . . We fired somewhere in the direction of the cries . . . but I'm afraid . . . I am afraid for Lieutenant Nicholson."

The non-commissioned officer stopped speaking. An ominous silence which hung over the three men was fraught with unexpressed anxiety. The *subadar* spoke first:

"You understand, captain, what he means?"

Brutally, with a gesture of impatience, he replied:

"Quite as well as you!"

The *subadar* looked out into the dreadful night. The non-commissioned officer wiped his forehead with his dirty hand. Roberts, his jaw set, his fists clenched, turned quietly towards the peak of the Cow's Head. The silence became unbearable. The *subadar* suggested in whispering tones:

"Could we send a patrol of four men? . . ."

He risked a look at the commanding officer, who remained immovable, apparently indifferent, far away from earthly things. . . . He was about to repeat his suggestion, thinking he had not been heard, when all of a sudden Roberts turned to him and ordered:

"No. You will not send a patrol. . . . You have need of all your men here. . . ."

In saying this he put his hand in the *subadar's* cartridge pouch and took out twenty revolver cartridges and filled up his own to the full amount. . . . He told the non-commissioned officer to bring him six hand-grenades. And as the astonished *subadar* looked at him, he added simply:

"I myself will go and look for Lieutenant Nicholson."

XIII

ROBERTS has set out to find the man he hates. All his malice, all his impious curses melt in the recollection of the horrible end that awaits the wounded left there during the night.

Revolver in hand, ready to meet suddenly the torturers at work, he began to climb the Cow's Head. It is difficult to see. But after a time the night does not seem so dark that one cannot distinguish objects. As he goes along his eyes become accustomed to the obscurity. He knows the track followed by the column. He has explored the district often enough, before hostilities began, to be able to go without hesitation. The night is calm. The muskets are quiet. He advances like a wild beast in the jungle, his eye on the look-out, his ears strained. Every now and again he stops, as he listens to a tell-tale sound, so as not to be attacked from behind, not to be sprung upon by a rebel ready to kill him.

He discovers, upon another slope of the peak, a human form, motionless among the stones. He goes near it. It is one of the slain Pathans. He looks at him a little closer to see if he is really dead, and sees with horror that his ears and nose have been cut off from his bleeding head. . . . His khaki uniform is also slashed. He does not dare

to verify it, but he fears another secret mutilation. . . . The discovery makes him tremble.

The pillagers are at work. They know that the column has passed this way; they have, then, "beautiful" work to do. And Nicholson, wounded, will perhaps suffer from their tortures!

He starts off again, his teeth clenched, stimulated by the fear of arriving too late. On the east side the Cow's Head is much more broken. Some huge blocks of black rock bar the way. Soon it turns into a tortuous ravine, then a mass of stones. . . . He looks on each side of the track. . . . Another Pathan corpse, its face to the earth, which indicates to him that he is on the right road.

He stops to consult his watch. The luminous hands show two o'clock in the morning. Before dawn, there remain three hours in which to find Nicholson and bring him back if he is still alive. He starts off again. An ominous rattle makes him suddenly stop. Gently he goes up to a man at the point of death, doubled up amongst a heap of stones. It is a wretched Pathan. He can do nothing for him. He must perforce leave him to his fate, and continue his searches, and even hurry on because time is precious.

All of a sudden, behind a great block of stone which fills up the ravine he has distinctly heard a clash of steel. Someone is there. With infinite care he climbs the rock and looks on the other side. . . . Two rebels whisper together bending over a man lying with his arms outstretched. What are they after? Who is the wounded man? Roberts watches them; tries to discover their sinister occupation. They have slit open the coat of the dead man with their long knife. . . . Roberts, craning his

neck forward, suddenly recognizes Nicholson's light khaki tunic. The lieutenant is there, wounded, semi-conscious. Abou el Heidja's butchers are about to perform upon him the rite explained by Bacha Ali. . . . The sign of the cross on the stomach! Then, seized with ungovernable rage, Roberts slips down from the rock, falling two yards from the bandits, and kills them one after the other with shots from his revolver. He bends over the wounded man and murmurs:

"Nicholson. . . . It is I. . . . Don't be afraid."

The wounded man does not understand. . . . He hardly moves. He makes some moaning noises which are not even words. Roberts wets his lips with a little water and says:

"I am going to pick you up. . . . I can't help it if I hurt you. . . . We must hurry because there are some others prowling about. . . ."

With the strength of a well-trained athlete, Roberts lifts up the wounded man, takes him on his back, folding his arms round his neck. He must beat a retreat and mount as far as the top of the Cow's Head, across this maze of ravines. . . . Roberts plods on, bending forward. The wounded man is heavy. But he must carry him to the end. With his left hand he presses the wounded man's wrists to his chest, so that he shall not slip down. Roberts goes on, fearing that his shots have been heard by other pillagers on the track. . . . He has almost reached the summit of the mountain when, at the end of the ravine, three shadows suddenly rise up. He points his revolver. . . . His heart gives a sudden anxious start. He presses in vain on the trigger of his revolver. The catch is up. Then there is only one hope. He lets the

wounded man fall at his feet, takes one of his grenades and throws it. It explodes, bringing down two of the rebels. The third disappears. . . . Roberts takes Nicholson on his back and trudges on. The descent on the other side is easier. Luckily, for his strength begins to fail and he pants under his burden. He descends more and more slowly towards the blockhouse. He is out of breath; he stumbles on the stones. Over there towards the east the sky turns a pale rose colour. The dawn is imminent. Can he reach the blockhouse before the eyes of the rebels, concealed five hundred yards away, have seen him upon the slope?

Suddenly the *subadar* appeared in front of him, in the grey haze. He exclaimed :

" Ah! captain. . . . I could not stand this uncertainty. . . . You have succeeded in finding him."

" Yes. . . . Help me to carry him. . . . We have still half a mile to go. . . . Let us hurry before the light exposes us."

They go on with the unconscious wounded man. Roberts stands up with difficulty. Their shadows little by little grow deeper. It is high time they regain their shelter from which they are no more than fifty yards.

One, two detonations ring out from the other side of the valley. Then others. The bullets ricochet on the stones. Suddenly Roberts utters an oath and lets go of Nicholson's legs.

" Are you hit, captain? "

" Yes. . . . In the forearm. . . . The blackguards. . . . Just as I'd got there."

" Let go. . . . I will carry the lieutenant alone."

" No. . . . I insist on carrying him to the end."

And in spite of his suffering, Roberts, with his right arm still sound, seizes the wounded man's legs once more, and starts off. The remaining shots luckily have no effect. He and the *subadar* at last reach the blockhouse. Then like a spring let loose Roberts' will-power and strength give out. He stumbles into the trench and falls, overcome with fatigue.

The two wounded officers are put side by side on the mattress in a corner of the casemate. The acting surgeon-major has ordered absolute immobility for Nicholson. The bullet, just above the thigh, has been extracted. His wound is serious, but he has a fair chance of recovery. Roberts after a few days' rest will be up again, because only the muscles of his arm have been touched.

After twelve hours' feverish sleep, the two wounded men begin to wake up. The casemate is lit by the last rays of twilight. The fusillade has calmed down. Suddenly Nicholson moves his left arm. His hand slips towards Roberts' hand, which is hanging down. It advances timidly and fearfully. It grips it. A mute clasp, a touching gesture, which arouses Roberts from his torpor. Nicholson's head is bent. He murmurs:

"You have saved me. . . . I shall never forget it. . . . Never."

"Shut up, Nicholson. . . . Don't talk too much. . . ."

"The blackguards were just going to mutilate me. . . . I've a hazy recollection."

"Luckily I got there in time. . . ."

"Roberts! . . . You are my brother. . . . Thank you."

"My dear old man . . . I couldn't leave you there. . . ."

Nicholson breathes heavily. The words come from his

lips with difficulty. Roberts is tortured by the wound in his arm, more painful than serious.

These two poor fellows who suffer and have forgotten their hatred in the danger that they have shared, look at one another for some time. Regret swells in their hearts. Regret for bitter words. Regret for the antagonistic thoughts that they have had for each other.

Roberts murmurs :

"Nicholson, we are probably destined to end it before long under the ruins of the blockhouse. . . . Forgive me for the evil I have wished you. . . ."

"My rescuer! . . . Don't say that. . . . No. . . . It is I who . . ."

"We shall probably die together at our post. . . . Let's end it friends . . . Nicholson. . . ."

"Yes . . . friends . . . good friends."

They looked round, their faces turned towards each other; their dirty faces seared by privations, by pain, by the anguish of death. Tears were in Nicholson's eyes. Tears of recognition for the sublime devotion of his chief. Suddenly he rose up, tried with difficulty to get to him. A painful effort. He stretched out his arm towards his rescuer, who also wished to wipe all out, to console him. But the wound in his left arm caused Roberts to make a grimace. They are there, drawn to one another and paralysed in their movements, but infinite gratitude harmonizes with good-will. That which is the highest, most noble, most pure has triumphed over the suggestions of evil. But the army surgeon sees them and exclaims :

"Say there . . . kindly keep still. . . . Nicholson! . . . complete immobility. . . . Do you hear?"

Then they obey. They each fall back on their couch,

but Roberts' right hand still grips Nicholson's left. They say no more. What's the use of futile words. In the silent twilight, in the violet shadows which filter through the casemate, an irresistible flame begins to flicker, lit by the hands of altruistic friendship.

The military hospital at Peshawar is full. The last victims of the insurrection, at length brought in, are being cared for. Peace reigns once again on the frontier. The garrisons of the forts held out. They have broken the spirit of the hordes of Afghans. Hard fighting. Many acts of heroism. The siege of Blockhouse 9 has been by no means the least dramatic.

Its commander, with his arm in a sling, at the head of the last defenders, worked the machine-guns to repel the waves of assailants, whilst the wounded, huddled together in the casemate, breathe their last near Nicholson, who is hovering between life and death. A memorable defence, about which all the Press of India and the United Kingdom has published long descriptions.

Then, the falling back of the tribes of Abou el Heidja under the heavy artillery fire of the reinforcements, the disbanding of the rebels, the retreat of the severely punished Waziris. The nightmare has come to an end. The wounded have been brought into Peshawar. Roberts, slightly hit in the leg, a second wound, has been, in accordance with his wish, put in the same ward as Nicholson, whose recovery is now well on the way.

They are sleeping in a real bed. At last they get iced drinks, nectar that they had not tasted for six months. The sun shines on the green lawn round the hospital. The crows fly about in the acacia trees. The little grey

squirrels leap from one tree trunk to another. The gramophone belonging to the two convalescents reclining on long chairs near to a massive hibiscus, is playing a fox-trot. Joyous rhythm that salutes the recovery of the survivors.

Shaved, clean, contented with life, the two friends chatted :

" Ah, Freddy . . . life is worth living now one has got rid of the superfluous face fungus."

" Yes, indeed . . . a beard is terribly degrading to one's morals. . . ."

" What did the *Toubib* say to you this morning? "

" Another two weeks and then hop it."

" We shall get six months' convalescence."

" More than six. . . . It should be a year. . . ."

" Well, we deserve it after that little show. . . ."

" I shan't forget Blockhouse 9 for some time. . . . We had a narrow squeak. We nearly went west. . . . The nine may be a blessing to partners at baccarat, but it was a curse to poor devils like us who act as caretakers at the doors of India."

" As far as I'm concerned, my dear Eddie, the Cow's Head will always be a perfect nightmare. . . . When I think of those delightful gentlemen who were about to operate for appendicitis with their snicker-snees! . . ."

" And without chloroform, old man."

" Eddie . . . you were really marvellous. . . . The risk you took for me beats anything I have . . ."

" As I've told you before—cut that out, Freddie . . ."

" Especially after what happened between us. . . ."

" What? . . . Because of a quarrel about a woman, was I to leave you to die like a dog, to let those black-

guardly bandits butcher you alive? Do you think, Freddy, that any woman in the world could be an excuse for such cowardice? ”

“ Ah, no! ”

“ Don’t you think that a friendship bred of trouble is like a child whose mother has conceived with difficulty a puny child that has been very hard to rear, and is therefore more dear to her? ”

“ We began by detesting each other. And now, Eddie, not only have you saved my life at the risk of your own, but you have opened my eyes. . . . This six months’ campaign has made me ten years older.”

“ My dear old Freddy! . . . Stop. . . . You’ll end up by comparing yourself to a hundred-year-old fakir from Allahabad! ”

Roberts got up, and at the door he called out to two convalescent friends :

“ Help! . . . Fairbanks . . . you’ll give us the hump with your reverie from Schumann. . . . Put us on another fox-trot. Life is worth living. . . . By gad! ”

The captain who was addressed waved a disc above his head, still tied up, and replied joyously :

“ Don’t shed tears, Roberts. . . . I’ll put on an old *Alleluia* which will make you dance till you drop.”

The reverie was taken off. The fox-trot revolves, inspiring in its rhythm. In their room Roberts and Nicholson, lying in their beds, whistle as loudly as they can, happy in their minds and supremely contented.

Twelve days later Colonel W. D. Reynolds, R.A.M.C., house-surgeon at the hospital, came into the ward. A smile illuminated his grave face and lit up his grey eyes

behind his gold spectacles. He shook hands with his patients and examined them.

"Good . . . very good. . . . Here are two jail-birds who in a few days will be let out of hospital to go back to the joys of civilization. . . . Six months' leave, both of you, to allow you once more to don evening dress, gentlemen. . . . But it is not for that that I came; I have something better to tell you. . . ."

"Has war broken out again with our neighbours?"

"No. . . . I have just heard on very good authority that you, Roberts, were recommended for the V.C., and you, Nicholson, for the M.C. And, as it never rains but it pours, you will be at once promoted to major and captain. . . . That's the box of pills I've brought you this morning."

The two officers had difficulty to conceal their satisfaction. They thanked the colonel, who added:

"Of course I have not told you. . . . You know nothing. . . . If I have committed an indiscretion, it is because I am sure that the moral effect helps to cure patients. . . . And now I must leave you to go and cut off a poor fellow's leg, whose foot shows signs of gangrene. . . . Happiness here . . . sorrow down there. . . . It is the horrible lottery of war. . . . Au revoir, you fellows!"

Roberts and Nicholson looked at one another when the colonel had gone out. Their happiness let loose, like contented schoolboys, they gave vent to their joy.

"Hallo, captain."

"I salute you, major!"

"Joking apart . . . a bit steep . . . the Victoria Cross. . . ."

"You earned it, Eddie."

"And you your Military Cross, old man."

"What pleases me is that all this good luck comes at once. . . . Shake hands, Eddie."

"Yes, rather."

"Listen. . . . I've something on my mind. . . . It must come out. Let's bury the hatchet once and for all. . . . With you and me it has been a matter of life and death. You have done something that could never happen again in a lifetime. . . . I shall always look upon you as a brother, and you know that we Nicholsons of Cornwall have never broken faith since John Andrew Nicholson, Alderman of Plymouth in 1820, was father of the family. . . . I swear to you before God as my witness that if ever in your life you have need of me you can call on me; I won't fail you. . . ."

"Why do you say that, Freddie? . . . I have realized it already. Nothing on earth can break our friendship now."

"True. But I want to bury the past once and for all."

Nicholson got up. He opened his little attaché case and took out a sealed envelope. He showed it to his friend.

"Do you recognize that? . . . The last letter I wanted to send from Fort No. 4. . . . It never went. I have kept it because I wanted to show you what had become of it."

Upon the table between the two beds was a tea kettle, heated by a spirit lamp. Nicholson took up the tea kettle. He held the sealed envelope over the flame and let it burn slowly in his fingers.

"That's the end of that . . . smoke."

Roberts had watched Nicholson without saying a word. When the letter had disappeared, he turned over the pages of his blotter, took out a photograph of Mme. de Nogales. He showed it to his friend.

"Since you are determined to bury the past, Freddy, I will follow your example. . . . So we will both together close that chapter in our lives. . . ."

Roberts held the photograph to the lamp. The picture burnt, very slowly. The flame, little by little, licked up the ermine cloak, the smile, the velvety eyes, the black hair. All that was left were a few grey ashes that Roberts blew away, whilst Nicholson also tore into small pieces the other portrait. They looked at one another, rather seriously, as if they did not care to joke about their solemn pact. Then Roberts quietly put the tea kettle back on its stand and remarked :

"The past is dead, isn't it, old chap? "

"Why, yes! . . . And buried without a single regret."

Nicholson took some bits of ash that were lying on the table. He let them fall through his fingers, and remarked as he poured the boiling water on the tea :

"It was not worth the harm that we would have done each other."

XIV

THE jazz band at Firpo's in Calcutta seemed to be electrified by the storm, which the evening before had drenched the grass plots in the market-place, surrounded by muddy streams from the Hoogly. It almost made that white sugar-like public building, the Victoria Memorial, melt. All the tables of the elegant restaurant of the capital of Bengal were occupied. Officers in dinner-jackets and white trousers sat amongst tourists in travelling costumes and American ladies in light dresses.

The enormous ventilators hummed above the dancers, and seemed, with their whirling propellers, to increase the rhythmic gyrations of the *plush* marionettes.

Major Roberts and Captain Nicholson were dining *rête-à-rête*. During the month that they had been in Calcutta, one had never been seen without the other. At balls, clubs, receptions at Government House, at consulate dinner-parties, at soirées, given by the rich jute merchants of Bally, the two heroes of the North-West Frontier were the lions of the moment. Everybody knew their story; Nicholson's raid, Roberts' exploit and his defence of Blockhouse 9 became legendary. Young girls in pink admired his V.C. Whilst the married women flirted desperately with the young Captain Nicholson.

Their friendship inspired respect. In fact their friendship was beautiful and noble, one of those pure sentiments absolutely altruistic, which are a credit to the men who enjoy and inspire them. They had left the hospital at Peshawar on sick leave and had determined to spend the first two or three months in India before returning to England. Invited to join in many polo games at Delhi and Bombay, and being thorough-going sportsmen, they had enjoyed themselves. Then they had come to Calcutta, where Roberts had a heap of friends who were anxious to give him a good time.

This particular evening, after a garden-party given by Lady Brent, they had gone to dine at Firpo's, to settle their further plans. They discussed them whilst they enjoyed their iced mangoes.

"Now, Freddy, we must really make up our minds. . . . When do we start for London? . . . The *Naldera* leaves Bombay at the end of the month. She is full, I made inquiries at Cook's."

"Very well, let us take berths on the *d'Artagnan*, the Messageries Maritimes boat. It leaves Colombo on February 12th. . . . In three weeks time. . . . Besides, I don't mind telling you that I prefer travelling on a French boat, because the cooking is better."

"Agreed. Then we stay three more weeks in India. . . . And my hat, one can have a pretty good time here."

"That's so. . . . Anyway, I don't know if you know it, Eddie, but you're a first-rate pal. Since we left hospital we have never had a dull moment. . . ."

"You old humbug, Freddy. . . . When I think how we began by misunderstanding each other. . . . It makes me laugh!"

"That's so . . . like a couple of cannibals. . . . If we'd gone on like that we should have ended by devouring each other and they would have found, in the mess one day, the tibia of Roberts and two or three phalanxes belonging to Nicholson . . . men can become regular savages when a woman comes between them."

"Ah! my poor Freddy, you don't know how far that can go. Yesterday evening at the Calcutta Club, Jimmy Bentley, managing director of the Californian Oil Company, gave me his confidence. He is very distressed because his wife has a crush on one of his friends . . . a very 'superior' person, a major on the Governor's staff. He told me he thought seriously of punching the blighter's face. . . ."

"No!"

"Absolutely. Then I said to him: 'Jimmy, you're a fool; you remember what Bismarck said about the Eastern Question: "It isn't worth the bones of a Pomeranian Grenadier. . . ." Well, no woman in the world is worth one gentleman's uppercut on another gentleman's chin. . . . One would be an idiot to sacrifice true friendship for the caprices of a coquette.' I even quoted Plautus to him; it was, by the way, the only thing I could remember from that Latin comic. Plautus declared that: 'The best of women are worth nothing.' He could have said that it is simply men's love of sex that gives them their value."

"Yes, but now you're talking about the senses."

"I ask you, Eddie, is there a single woman in Calcutta who would make you feel like smashing a gin bottle over my head?"

"That is very simple, Freddy; you have seen me having

a violent flirtation with Mrs. Whencott and little Ellaline Crossley, who has not sent word that a little week-end at Darjeeling would shock her? Well, if you said to me: 'Eddie, leave the field clear, because I want to torpedo the brunette or the blonde,' I shouldn't make any bones about it, I should give you a good smack on the back and reply: 'Fire ahead, my boy!'

"Another man overboard. . . ."

"Yes! Romeo was not the creation of a poet but the patient of a brain specialist, who needed a hot and cold douche. We have tried the rope ladder and we very nearly strangled ourselves on the first rung. Fortunately tragic circumstances brought us to our senses."

"In my case it needed a bullet in my chest, and your bravery, to make me see things clearly. One always finishes by seeing things as they really are. In reality, love is a pair of prismatic binoculars which distort the truth. . . . One needs the sense to adjust them, so that you can see the wart on the end of Venus's nose."

"Yes. . . . And do you know why so many people don't see it?"

"No."

"Because more often than not there is no wart on the outside of the nose, but a polypus on the inside."

The waiter brought the coffee and the cigars. Then the diners at the adjacent tables began looking towards the door and whispering to one another. Roberts remarked with an ironical smile:

"Look, Freddy. . . . You have not yet seen the Maharanee of Dranagore. Well, there she is with her pet gigolo."

The Maharanee, dressed in a *sari* edged with gold

embroidery, crossed the room, followed by three good-looking Englishmen in dinner-jackets, her *aide-de-camp*, a Hindu and a lady friend. She was very seductive, her bronze skin harmonized perfectly with her pale yellow silk drapery. Two splendid pearl necklaces hung on her neck, pink pearls perfectly graduated, that the Maharajah of Dolilpur himself would have envied.

Roberts, better informed than his friend, gave him full details :

"She is one of the most daring Hindu Princesses, if one may say so. Perfect English education and wonderfully intelligent. An absolute disregard for what people may say, and a great liking for Western amusements; which is uncommon between the Ganges and the Godavery. . . . She is as well known in London as in Paris, in Berlin as in Rome. . . . See how she dances with that young boy. . . . You would never think that her father had sanctified her body in the water of the Ganges and offered garlands of frangipane to the idol Ganesh."

"Who is dancing with her? "

"Steve Burgess of the 18th Poonah Horse. . . ."

"Burgess, captain of the polo team which beat Cashmir at Delhi last month? "

"Yes. . . . He is an old pal. . . . If he had seen me he would have made a bee-line for us. . . ."

The two friends drank their coffee. Suddenly Roberts said to Nicholson :

"I say, old top . . . you look to me as if you've rather fallen for the Maharanee."

"One might do worse."

"Would you like to be introduced? "

"Why not? "

"That's easy. . . . I'll give Burgess the tip."

The polo captain replied immediately to Roberts' friendly wink. He got up and exclaimed excitedly:

"Hallo, old bean! . . . How long have you been in Calcutta?"

"Three weeks. . . . You know my friend Freddy Nicholson. . . . Captain Burgess, expert ping-pong player on horseback!"

The two young captains shook hands cordially.

"Captain Nicholson. . . . You are the celebrated Nicholson of Blockhouse 9? . . ."

And after a modest nod of acquiescence the polo player said:

"Then I must shake hands again. . . . When I want a raid making on my creditors, I shall ask you to give me some tips."

Roberts interrupted him, whispering:

"Just a word, Steve. . . . Who is the favourite with the Maharanee just now?"

"She is hesitating between two of my friends. The apple of judgment is in the balance on a dessert knife."

"Ah well, then will you present my friend Freddy to Her Highness? It may put things right."

"Certainly. . . . Come on, boys!"

The two officers hesitated.

"Do you really think we can suddenly butt in like that? . . ."

"Why, she will be delighted! One does not get the chance of having two notabilities like you at one's table every day . . . and then I can do what I like with Anjali because I taught her how to play poker."

The introduction was a great success. Champagne

flowed on the flower-bedecked table. Roberts and Nicholson danced with the Maharanee. Then the conversation became more intimate. And when closing time arrived the beautiful Indian Princess suggested:

"I will take you all back with me to my house . . . for a whisky and soda, the customary night-cap before you go to bed. . . . Steve, will you take my friends in your car? I'll take these gentlemen in mine."

Close to the pavement, in front of Firpo's colonnade, the Maharanee's Rolls stood waiting, a long torpedo, silver and pale yellow with its coat-of-arms. She drove through the market-place at sixty miles an hour, and stopped in front of her villa, among the palms, coco trees, the bougainvillæa and the *camerops*. A quarter of an hour later everybody was seated in oriental fashion on the verandah, with iced drinks in front of them. The Maharanee, reclining carelessly upon cushions, opened her portable gramophone, whilst Nicholson looked for a record.

The first bars of "Mean To Me" rose in the still night air, fresh after the storm.

"Give me one of your cigarettes, Major Roberts. . . . They are very good."

"Please take what I have, Your Highness."

The charming profile of the Indian lady showed clearly above the flame of the lighter. She puffed the smoke towards the stars and exclaimed suddenly:

"Steve . . . I have an idea."

"That surprises me."

"You impolite rascal. . . ." She threw a cushion at him. "You take all Indian women for Zenana¹ girls."

¹ The Zenana is the women's quarters in the Hindu houses, like the harem in Moslem.

"Come, Anjali! If all your sisters were as intelligent as you, you would long ago have done away with the Zenana! You said you had an idea."

"Yes! . . . I have a very good idea. . . . We are all asked, as you know, to hunt at my brother-in-law's, the Maharajah of Bangamer at the end of the month. . . . Well, if your two friends would care to come, I will invite them as well. . . . What do you say, gentlemen?"

Roberts and Nicholson looked at one another, amazed.

"Your Highness is very kind, but . . ."

"But what . . . ?"

"We do not know the Maharajah of Bangamer."

"But you know me, that's enough. Besides, you will get a formal invitation at my request."

"The fact is we intend to sail on the 12th of next month. . . ."

"Well, you can take the following boat. . . . You cannot miss a splendid shoot. And there will be some European guests. . . . Lord and Lady Hurling, the Marquis and Marquise de Pazanne, an Egyptian Prince, and a dozen other people of note. . . . It will be very amusing. . . . I may add, that my august brother, whatever his failings may be, has at least one gift; he knows how to entertain. He will give you hecatombs of antelopes and gazelles. . . . Ah! That, at any rate, will tempt you!"

Nicholson protested:

"Your Highness's smile is more than any herd of black bucks!"

"Ah! Then . . . you say yes."

The two friends looked at one another and finished up with:

"Very well . . . we shall be delighted to be the Maharajah of Bangamer's guests."

At two o'clock in the morning, Roberts and Nicholson took leave of the Maharanee and walked home. The leaves of the tropical trees in the Botanical Gardens trembled in the night breezes. Roberts lit a cigar.

"So, Freddy, our plans are changed. . . . What do you think about this shooting party?"

"Wonderful. . . ."

"Are you keen on the Maharanee?"

"Oh! A flirtation, nothing serious. . . . I must admit, anyhow, that she is very charming. . . . But you know I have no liking for this sort of tournament in which one has to play the lover until the fair one deigns to drop her handkerchief."

"Ah! The old British arrogance reappearing! . . . But you don't seem to realize that masculine pride is the door-mat on which Eros wipes his feet."

"Don't worry about me, Eddie. . . . I am armour-plated just now. . . . You also. . . . And the 'fair frigate' who tries to sink us, whether she flies the black flag of the brunettes or the gold flag of the blondes, will go down before we shall; mark my word."

XV

THE palace of red sandstone, in Indo-Arabian style, has been carved like a shrine by artificers from Rajputana, who have followed the period of the Great Moguls, those astonishing masters. With their chisels they change the stone into lace, and with their hammer blows embellish it with arabesques beyond one's imagination. This palace, worthy of the "Arabian Nights," is built in the heart of the desert, amid the flowers, the lakes, the shrubberies; a mile away from the old city, which is as rose red as if it had been powdered with dark ochre, and its high walls are adorned with innumerable flocks of white pigeons.

It is the residence of the Maharajah of Bangamer, one of the most important Princes of Rajput, who, when he does not don the sumptuous costume of his ancestors, with its sky-blue turban, wears, with ease, the customary costume of Biarritz or of the Lido. His suits are made in London by the best tailor in Savile Row.

The Maharanee of Dranagore was right to praise his hospitality. Few Indian Princes knew how to entertain European guests as he did, to anticipate their wishes and to satisfy their curiosity. His chef is renowned for his cuisine. His *shikaris* are the hunter's delight.

Colonel Ramda Singh, *aide-de-camp* to the Maharajah,

who went to meet Roberts and Nicholson at the station, escorts them to a wing of the palace, where they are lodged with the other guests. Roberts knew the colonel, as he had once met him at a big-game party and had shot tigers with him in the Terai jungle, on the frontier of Nepal. And he had been received with especial cordiality. As soon as the two friends had taken possession of their rooms, which adjoined, Ramda Singh reappeared with a boy, bringing a propitiatory whisky and soda, and gave them a sketch of the programme.

"His Highness, as his sister-in-law has no doubt told you, hopes to give you and his other European friends some good sport. The last time His Excellency the Viceroy paid him a visit they killed, amongst other heads of game, eleven thousand sand partridges. I don't think you will return empty handed. There will be as many antelopes and gazelles as you want . . . and Lord Hurling, by the way, is one of the best shots in Scotland. His Highness trusts that he will be able to show his skill."

"Would it be indiscreet, colonel, to ask whom we shall meet here? "

"Not at all. . . . We have the Marquis and Marquise de Pazanne, French people, who entertained His Highness in Paris in their splendid mansion at Auteuil; Saraf Pacha, a former Egyptian minister in London; Mr. Somerset Byrnes, the well-known English barrister; the Duchess de Cassano and her daughter, who are touring through India, and Mr. and Mrs. Stoker of New York. . . . So much for the foreign element. . . . You already know the Maharanee of Dranagore and your friend, Captain Steve Burgess. . . . But His Highness has also invited four officers of the Lancer regiments, of which he

is the honorary colonel: Major W. W. Stead, Captain Young, R. L. Miller and J. S. Freeman."

"Oh, I know Stead very well! . . . We were on transport work when troops were sent home from Palestine in 1919. . . ."

"And I know Freeman," said Nicholson. "We used to play tennis together at the Gymkana Club at Lahore. . . . I shall be very glad to meet old Freeman again."

The *aide-de-camp* smiled.

"Well, I am glad to find that you will be among friends. I forgot to say that Major-General J. J. Armstrong is also coming. When everyone has arrived at the palace we shall leave for the other residence at Gizagar, where His Highness prefers to stay for the shooting. There, you will be near the drives, and you will, as one might almost say, be able to see the gazelles gallop under your windows. . . . Now, gentlemen, will you dress for dinner? His Highness will meet you at seven o'clock in the smoking-room. . . . I will come and fetch you at five minutes to seven."

The *aide-de-camp* went out. Roberts and Nicholson rested in their armchairs before changing.

"Ah, well, Freddy old man. . . . This little sojourn in the wilds of Rajputana promises very well! . . ."

"I don't ~~forget~~ ^{miss} the providential meeting with the Maharanee."

"Did you expect, ~~after~~ ^{after} twenty-four hours in the train across the arid land ~~and~~ ^{and} did, ~~desert~~ ^{desert}, to find a fairy palace like this? . . . Have you seen the bathrooms? Hot and cold water, every modern comfort along with the cactus and stones calcined by the sun."

"Astounding! Ah, Eddie, may the good life continue; just think that since that dog's life of the frontier, since we have become inseparable friends, everything goes smilingly. . . . I am perhaps an idiot, but I think that a friendship like ours brings secret virtues which drive away dull care, bad luck and misfortune."

"Hush, Freddy. . . . Touch wood. . . ."

"You are superstitious? "

"Yes and no. . . . But, you know, one can't help being influenced by thousands of people who are afraid of spilt salt and three lights. . . . There's no sense in it, but in spite of oneself one falls into these ridiculous habits. . . . You oughtn't to have said we were in luck. . . . We shall probably strike a snag before long."

"Come on, Eddie. . . . Your talking . . . Confound it . . . already six-thirty."

"We must get ready, old man."

Each in his room began to dress; as they changed they talked through the communicating door, which was open.

"What has become of our beautiful Indian lady friend, Eddie? "

"She has gone to the Zenana."

"What! She, who seemed so very sophisticated when we were in Calcutta? "

"Yes, but here, at her brother-in-law's house, there are customs, traditions. She may take her meals with us, but afterwards she will retire to the women's quarters with the daughters of the Maharajah, who never appear. What about your love affair? "

"Oh, that's nothing! Do you expect me to go and climb the walls of the Zenana at midnight? . . . No, I'm

thinking much more about the shooting we're going to get in three days' time."

The smoking-room and the immense billiard-rooms were decorated with forty-five tiger skins hung obliquely on the walls. Between the high windows, pictures of hunting scenes in which the master of the house had taken part; deer, rhinoceros, wild boar and crocodile hunting. Indian servants in scarlet robes embroidered with gold, handed round cocktails upon trays studded with precious stones.

The Maharajah greeted his new guests with great affability. They were presented by Colonel Ramda Singh. With his bronze complexion, his grey hair, his moustache cut short, his black eyes, the Prince wore with absolute ease the ordinary Western evening dress. He spoke perfect English with an eloquence that he used each year with great effect in the House of Princes at Delhi.

"Gentlemen," said the Maharajah to Roberts and Nicholson, "it was a very good idea of my sister-in-law of Dranagore to drag you from the delta of the Ganges to come and have a taste of the dryness of our desert. You have been able to realize that trees are a curiosity in Rajputana and that the Bandar Logs, so dear to Kipling, would have difficulty here in swinging themselves from branch to branch. That does not prevent us from inviting you in two days' time to a little shooting."

The arrival of the Marquise de Pazanne, followed by her husband, cut the Maharajah short. With obvious haste he came forward to meet the Marquise, whose elegance, in her lamé evening gown, had made a sensation. Roberts, Nicholson, Burgess and Stead, who were

standing together by one of the billiard tables, exchanged looks of admiration.

" Ah! the Parisians. . . . How *chic* they are. Just look at that woman, what a graceful line. . . ."

" Frenchmen are extraordinary. . . . They disparage one another, slang one another, eat one another in the name of politics, which sends them mad. . . . Good heavens, when they have such topping women at hand, they might agree."

" That is, if they don't quarrel about them."

Nicholson gaily asked the commandant Stead :

" You believe that woman is still the apple of discord, major? "

" Of course. . . . Without her, humans would quarrel once in every seven years. And only then after a heavy storm."

Roberts went one better.

" Ah well, Stead old boy, I have just been cured of this notion, like Nicholson. . . . And you, Burgess? You accept blindly all this humbug. It is the publicity maintained by women who, failing all else, are happy to proclaim: ' Look how important I am! Look at my work. . . . Since the Trojan war things have not changed. . . . With a smile, with a yes or no, we can still let loose the dogs of war. . . .' Ah well, my answer to all these pretentious little ladies is: ' Helen is dead, and your hoodoo dates from the Wooden Horse of the Iliad.' "

" No, Roberts, love is the same as it was two thousand years ago. Love is the Vth International and the real one! The rest are founded upon political Utopias, beautiful nonsense. . . . Every human speaks the same

love language. It has neither the *iota* nor the *th* nor the nasal accent nor the German *chen* in it."

"True, true. I admit that love, at heart, may be the same in Tokio as in Belgrade, but it is the importance of the woman which has decreased. Or perhaps I should say, the deification of love, the cause of so many dramas, which is on the wane."

"Men kill themselves less and less because of the beautiful eyes of a woman."

"You are speaking for us Anglo-Saxons, whose brains are deadened by ale and stout. But there are plenty of *crimes passionels* among the Latin races."

"They are lunatics or fools."

Major Stead put down his glass of port and spoke directly to Roberts.

"Well, old boy, let me give you an example: Suppose two men are frightfully enamoured of the same lady. Tell me how you can get out of that *impasse* without drama."

Burgess muttered, as he bit off the end of a cigar:

"Yes . . . toss up."

"No. . . . I am speaking seriously."

"Well, the woman decides; it is very simple, like the child who, after hesitating between the train and the rocking-horse, chooses the toy which pleases him the better of the two."

The incorrigible Burgess remarked:

"Except that he suddenly chooses a pistol, Eureka! Women are like that. The third time pays for all."

Major Stead reiterated:

"You say that the woman decides. . . . Good. . . . But if you were madly in love with a woman who loved another, wouldn't you see red?"

Roberts suddenly called to his mind a recent happening that Stead's inopportune question jarred. He forced himself to laugh, and replied :

" Old boy! I may perhaps have seen red already . . . but after a time the red fades."

Their conversation was interrupted by Colonel Ramda Singh, who asked the cause of their excitement.

" Football or polo? "

Burgess protested :

" No, you'll be surprised we were speaking of love in general. Naturally, the entrance of the beautiful Marquise de Pazanne had turned our thoughts to that subject."

" A pleasant subject, gentlemen; it is a pity that the English affect, so often, to banish it from their discussions,"

" They do not speak of it, but they think of it, none the less. We are not little saints, what! We like to pretend to the world in order to astonish our neighbours, but do not forget the old adage : Virtue with the English is snow on a Japanese volcano."

A young *aide-de-camp* appeared with a despatch and handed it to the colonel.

" A telegram for His Highness. . . ."

The colonel opened it and announced to the officers around him :

" I fancy His Highness will delay, for a day, our start to the shoot. Two of his guests that he expected to-day cannot get here till to-morrow evening."

Burgess seemed disappointed. He asked point blank :

" May we ask who these distinguished guests are? "

" Of course, certainly. . . . They are His Serene Highness Prince de Zorren and Mme. de Nogales."

XVI

THE electroliers of the Yacht Club at Bombay shed their reflections on the gently moving sapphire of the placid sea. Opposite the eastern door, several small craft, with their yards aslant like a flourish at the end of their masts, rocked lazily in the clear night.

Upon the terrace of the club, overlooking the splendid bay, Prince de Zorren, Commodore Stevenson, the French Vice-Consul at Calcutta, and dapper Captain Fairbanks of the 27th Rajput Rifles hung round the extremely beautiful Mme. de Nogales, a mauve chiffon flower in the midst of the black dinner-jackets. Stevenson had invited his friends to dinner to give her a warm welcome. A gay dinner, a passable cuisine, doubtful wine. But the bay was so charming this evening, it presented such a delightful polychrome of harmonious blues which ranged from deep sapphire to lapis lazuli, passing through turquoise and pale sky blue, so that no one attached the least importance to the material preoccupation of the table.

Mme. de Nogales was relating with vivacity what she had seen at Cairo, Luxor and Assouan. Captain Fairbanks with great eagerness offered her an Abdulla, when the one in her tortoise-shell cigarette-holder came to an

end. Commodore Stevenson, with remarkable agility, offered her an ash tray. The Vice-Consul smiled at the remarks of the charming traveller in mauve, and kept his own counsel.

"And what are your plans in India?" Stevenson asked the Prince.

"Ah well, we shall go first to Delhi, to see the Viceroy, then we shall visit Agra and Benares. I am a connoisseur of old manuscripts and hope to unearth some Sanscrit writings which will give me a tying-up. Then we shall go to Jaipur and Udaipur. And I am told that at Rajputana the colouring is marvellous."

"Be sure you don't miss Bangamer, in the heart of the desert. This city seems to have been coloured by a Cyclops, who loved crushed strawberries."

Captain Fairbanks came in with:

"Try and get the Maharajah to invite you to one of his shoots. Wonderful hospitality. . . . Game galore. . . . Not to mention that Your Serene Highness will find there a collection of manuscripts dating from the time of the Emperor Shah Jahan."

"Ah! Ah! You make my mouth water, captain."

"And if you like, I will write to two of my friends, who are visiting the Prince. They will be happy to do anything they can to help to make your stay agreeable."

"Thank you. . . . I will make a note of their names."

"Major Edward Roberts and Captain F. Nicholson."

Mme. de Nogales, who was talking to the Vice-Consul, turned her head sharply.

"What names did you say?"

"Roberts and Nicholson."

Prince Zorren asked:

"Do you know them, my dear?"

"No . . . but wait a minute. . . . Nicholson? . . . Nicholson? . . . Once at Cairo, I did meet a Lieutenant Nicholson."

"That's he, madame. . . . In the English army, as in many others, the way to become a captain is first to be a lieutenant. . . . He and his friend know India very well. They will be useful to you."

"And his friend, what again is his name?"

"Edward Roberts. A hero . . . a V.C. They were together in Afghanistan. . . . Two topping fellows, and what friends."

Mme. de Nogales was extremely interested. But she smothered her curiosity and, without appearing to do so, insisted:

"Indeed? Great friends?"

"More than that. Inseparables. . . . They are known in India for their friendship, which is as beautiful as an ancient marble statue. Orestes and Pylades were at daggers drawn in comparison. But that seems to surprise you?"

"Surprise me? . . . Oh! No. . . . I often met Lieutenant Nicholson. . . . He had a very reserved manner, not at all the man to play Pylades to a fellow-officer."

Fairbanks brought up his chair and spoke in an undertone, making a sign to his listeners to come nearer.

"Listen, as Mme. de Nogales knows whom I am speaking about, I will tell you a little amusing anecdote about the friendship of these two fellows. I was in hospital at Peshawar at the same time they were, I was being treated for a slight wound that I got near Fort Landi

Kana. . . . One day, lolling in a deck-chair in front of their room window I put on my gramophone. They were talking vivaciously. Suddenly I heard one of them say to the other:

“ ‘ I say, old man, let’s bury the past once and for all.’

“ I raised my head and saw Nicholson showing a letter which had nothing official about it. He burnt it in the flame of a spirit lamp. Roberts then pulled out the photograph of a woman and burnt it in the same flame, whilst his friend tore into a thousand pieces another photograph, as he laughed:

“ ‘ It was not worth the harm we would have done each other.’

“ When this *auto-da-fé* ended the two friends shook hands, laughing as if they had done a good turn to I don’t know whom. . . . I concluded from this little scene that their friendship was sincere, because they had just agreed to bury some forgotten flirtation. . . . Don’t you think it rather amusing, madame? ”

Mme. de Nogales smiled. An ambiguous sort of smile that one couldn’t quite fathom.

“ Yes . . . very amusing, in fact.”

Prince de Zorren remarked:

“ Friendship is the only true sentiment that survives in an age of *simili*, of paste and of Ersatz! ”

And Stevenson finished up with:

“ It is written in the Upanishads that friendship is the trunk of a tree which resists all tempests except when it is struck by the lightning of a woman’s glance.”

On leaving the Yacht Club, Prince de Zorren and Mme. de Nogales strolled back to their hotel.

Alba walked in silence by the side of her companion. She hardly listened to his remarks, that did not interest her. When they reached the sitting-room of their suite, Alba complained of feeling tired, and went towards her room.

"Wait a few minutes, my dear," said the Prince. "I want to suggest a little programme of our journey. . . . I propose that we leave Bombay the day after to-morrow and to go to Delhi. . . . I will show you Agra, the Taj Mahal and the old fort of the Mongols. Then we will go and visit Rajputana."

"I think that will be perfectly delightful. . . . And that crushed strawberry city, that your friends talked about? . . . Just for the colour I should love to see it. What do you think? "

"Ah! I quite agree with you, my dear little Alba. They talked of the rose red town, and that has fired your imagination. Well, I promise to ask the Viceroy to get us an invitation from the Maharajah of Bangamer."

"You are really a darling. Thank you, thank you."

The Prince kissed Alba's hand and she withdrew into her room with a gracious smile, by a way of adieu.

Scarcely had she shut the door, when the smile that had just lit up her beautiful face instantly vanished. She tossed her evening cloak on an armchair. She took off her bracelets and rings, and lighting a cigarette she stopped in front of the window. The symphony in blue that the bay presented at that moment, left her unmoved. She gazed into the night, but she did not see the stars, nor the lights of the boats that lay at anchor. With her hands clasping the stone window-sill, she was haunted by Captain Fairbanks' story. . . . Very amusing indeed, those

letters and photographs burnt by her two old lovers, who had become the best friends in the world. . . . Very flattering this reconciliation at her expense! She walked up and down the large room where the bed with its mosquito net stood like a white muslin cube. She twisted her necklace with her nervous hands. Sudden visions of her past rushed through her mind, confused visions, one after the other, which agitated or exasperated her.

First her liaison with Roberts, a passionate liaison. Then those hours, barren of enthusiasm, with Nicholson in Cairo. She saw herself once more enraptured by love, enjoying the most perfect moments of her life with Roberts in London. She recalled the real grief of that terrible separation; then her fresh adventure with Nicholson in Egypt. The foolish love of this young lieutenant, who, at the end of his patience, had finished by overcoming his scruples. She recalled the dramatic scenes she had had with her wretched husband, that professional card-sharper, that fashionable crook that she had run away from to seek the protection of Prince de Zorren, who was so eager to make her happy; so correct, so patient and so resigned in his love-making. She had agreed to accompany him to India in the secret hope of finding Roberts, in order to explain her long silence, imposed by circumstances. And hardly had she landed in Bombay, when chance threw the naked truth in her face. . . . The two men had become close friends! What mockery! Roberts, whom she had loved so deeply, had grasped Nicholson's hand. . . . Nicholson, notwithstanding his passion for her, had made friends with Roberts. . . . And that, although they were fully aware that their love was returned. They had gone

further. They had made game of her. They had even mutually agreed to burn her photographs.

Alba's silent anger was mixed with spite, pride, unexpressed regrets and hatred of men. The eternal masculine, like a grinning phantom. She could not drive from her thoughts the phrase that Captain Fairbanks had repeated:

"It was not worth the harm we would have done each other."

These humiliating words whipped her; an insult to her beauty, her personality, her secret charm. She went back to the window, standing motionless, her brows knitted above her beautiful half-closed eyes. She gazed out once more into the clear night, and in her pupils there lurked defiance, that she hurled to the stars.

XVII

THE dinner was a brilliant affair. Roberts sat with Lady Hurling on his right, and the daughter of the Duchess de Cassano on his left. Nicholson sat on the opposite side of the table next to Mrs. Stokes.

Roberts chatted gaily with his neighbours. It appeared, at any rate, that he was in his ordinary good spirits. As a matter of fact he was glad of the respite that the conversation of his neighbours, and other guests, gave him from thinking.

The news that the Maharajah's *aide-de-camp* had just told him was so unexpected that he asked himself, with curiosity mingled with perturbation, whether he had properly understood. . . . Mme. de Nogales, travelling in India with Prince de Zorren? He had longed for the dinner to be over so that he could ask further details from Colonel Ramda Singh.

While coffee was being served in the drawing-room he listened with a distrait air to Burgess's stories, and took the first opportunity he could to join the *aide-de-camp*. He saw him inside the gallery of the colonnade that surrounded the patio. Nicholson was with him already. Before he was able to ask a question he heard Ramda Singh replying to his friend :

"Honestly I don't know much about these latest guests that His Highness is expecting. . . ."

And, turning to Roberts, the Indian explained :

"Your friend has been asking me who Mme. de Nogales is. I find it very difficult to tell him. All that I can say is that Prince de Zorren is the heir-apparent of a family which reigns in Central Europe; that the Maharajah met the Prince in Cairo; that the Foreign Office has given him a special introduction to the Viceroy; that, in consequence, the Maharajah, beyond his personal relations with him, has every reason to be gracious."

Roberts insisted :

"But this Mme. de Nogales who is coming with him? "

"I know nothing whatever about her. . . ."

Nicholson, with an indifference that appeared quite natural, added :

"I knew slightly, some time ago, a Mme. Alba de Nogales. Is it by chance . . . ? "

"That's right : Alba Nogales. Yes, that's the Christian name."

Nicholson, too loudly to be sincere :

"Ah! . . . That's very amusing , . . eh, Eddie? . . . The world is very small! "

"Yes."

The *aide-de-camp* led them into the drawing-room. The two friends took liqueurs with the rest of the party. They were able to play billiards which lasted till half-past twelve. The Maharajah retired. At a quarter to one they had a last *chota peg* and they all retired to their rooms.

Roberts and Nicholson went without a word, crossing the galleries of the immense palace, and at last found their doors.

Whilst Roberts was pouring out a bottle of soda into his glass, Nicholson appeared at the door. He was untying his white tie. Roberts turned.

"I say . . . what a coincidence!"

"Yes. It is funny."

"There's no doubt about it; Ramda Singh is quite right. . . . This Prince was in Egypt. . . . Mme. de Nogales has come with him."

"She must have left her husband. . . ."

"That was bound to happen!"

"In order to become a prince's mistress?"

"I suppose so. . . ."

Nicholson had taken off his waistcoat. His arms folded on his shirt front, he looked at his friend. This silence annoyed Roberts, who jokingly remarked:

"Ah well, old boy. . . . Then, are you changed into a pillar of salt because . . ."

He did not want to say the name of Mme. de Nogales. And as Nicholson still did not reply, he assumed an exaggerated air of indifference.

"We mustn't allow the arrival of this woman to spoil our sport, all the same!"

"Oh!"

"Hallo, Freddy. . . . What's that?"

"Nothing at all. . . . To speak frankly, I should have preferred that . . . that the woman did not come. . . . Ah, the past is dead, quite dead."

"Of course! These incidents of the past have gone along with waning moons. . . . If we were to let old loves poison our lives we should never make old bones."

"She has ended by leaving her wretched husband."

"And she is right!"

" And now she has attached herself to this fellow. . . . "

" A Screne Highness, my boy. . . . She might have done worse. To begin with, she is not a mistress under those circumstances; she's a morganatic wife. . . . It is more *chic*. . . . "

" Is he young or old? "

" That's something that doesn't interest me any more than my first cricket match! . . . We shall see, in a couple of days, if she has shown good taste."

Nicholson went back into his room. Roberts heard him throw his shoes on the marble floor. After a few minutes' silence he called out :

" Hallo, old man. . . . Have you got the hump? "

Nicholson reappeared.

" I am surprised that you joke like that."

" And why not? . . . For nearly a year that woman has gone out of our lives. . . . She is as dead to us as we are to her. . . . She never tried to find out what had become of us."

" Oh! you know the post out there is a little uncertain. My mother has since written to me to say that many letters that she sent never reached me."

" Ah well, old chap, if even she had had the decency to remember that you existed . . . that we existed . . . that doesn't alter things as they are. . . . Believe me, leave the dead in their tombs, and ghosts to old maids."

" You're quite right. Good night, Eddie."

" Sleep well, Freddy. . . . "

The communicating door closed. Roberts, alone in his room, drank the rest of the soda. It seemed that he had a thirst. Was it the expectation of enjoyable shooting parties in the brushwood, or a little fever due to the

astonishing news of the evening? Anyhow, he had spoken to his friend Nicholson with perfect calmness, even with a light-hearted indifference which was not the act of a man who was in the least degree upset. But was this light-hearted tone, this chaff about Mme. de Nogales' destiny, in keeping with the true state of his mind?

He continued pondering as he got into bed, and his thoughts kept him awake until two o'clock in the morning. Now that he was alone and no longer obliged to play a part in the presence of his friend, he asked himself if Nicholson was not right to deplore what he looked upon as an unfortunate contretemps. And he replied mentally to his questions: Alba's presence at the Maharajah's is of no consequence; she has forgotten me; our relationship during this holiday at Gizager will be polite but distant, as becomes two people who have broken definitely the bonds which once united them. How many couples who have been in love ignore one another afterwards as if there had never been anything between them! One sees cases like that, daily. . . . Time has wiped out even the savour of our kisses. A new love has come into her life. As for me, I have no new love, but I have schooled myself to forget her perfume and the accents of her love. In that case I honestly don't see why her reappearance should in any way affect my life.

He fell asleep at last. In the morning he awoke. The slight depression of the evening before had vanished. His good spirits returned as he roused himself, and he realized that the arrival of the telegram addressed to the Maharajah did not worry him in the least. With a happy yawn, he felt pleased with himself. Why, everything is all right. . . . Last night I drank a bottle of

soda to quench my unholy thirst. . . . This morning I get out of bed and think no more about her. . . . I am quite cured. So much the better!

The noise of a chair being overturned in the next room told him that his friend was up. He called out:

"Hallo, Freddy. . . . Slept well?"

He tattooed a merry little tune with his knuckles on the closed door.

"Come in."

He entered and was surprised to find Nicholson, almost dressed, bending over his suit-case, packing his clothes. He was astonished.

"You are tidying up at this time of the day, old bean?"

Nicholson looked round. He did not seem to be in a joking mood.

"Eddie . . . I am packing my things. . . . We must give up this shooting party."

"What! . . ."

"Yes. . . . Listen to me. I have been thinking it over in the night. I can promise you that what is happening is more serious than you think. Take my advice . . . pack up and make some plausible excuse to the Maharajah."

Roberts' surprise was so great that for a moment he did not speak. Then he exclaimed:

"But, my dear chap, you are silly. . . . Pack up? . . . Rush off in a hurry? . . . And why, for heaven's sake? Because . . ."

He hesitated. . . . Obviously neither one nor the other wanted to mention *her* name. He continued:

"Because the woman is going to be in the Maharajah's party? Come, come! That's no reason. . . . Freddy

. . . let's speak plainly. . . . Leave your suit-case alone and listen to me. . . . We are not weathercocks, damn it! Nor children who say yes to-day and no to-morrow. Twenty times since we left hospital we have spoken of *her*. . . . Have we been acting a comedy? "

"No."

"Then, in the name of conscience, we are sincere. We are straight. . . . I have not told you fairy stories. . . . I don't care a straw for the woman now. You have said over and over again that no flirtation in the world can upset the friendship of two straight men. . . . You surely meant it! "

"On my word of honour, I spoke the truth. . . . However, I'm afraid. . . . No! that's an exaggeration . . . I'm not afraid. . . . I was silly to say that. . . . But I ask myself if we ought not to get away from something that might prove dangerous."

"Dangerous! My dear old man, you make me laugh! Danger? Whatever danger can you see in the presence of a woman who reappears to us with her . . . with her new conquest? . . . Listen once more. . . . Shall we admit that, in spite of everything, in spite of yourself, there is, unknown to you, in your heart, a suspicion of tenderness for her? . . . I will go even further. Let us suppose that you are absolutely deluded and that you unconsciously harbour a secret affection for *her*. . . . Do you mean to tell me that the indignity of a woman, who now presents herself on the arm of a fellow from the Almanac de Gotha, would not be sufficient to damp your ardour completely? "

Roberts' argument was logical. Nicholson realized it.

"Theoretically, Eddie, you are perfectly sound. . .

It is highly probable that if I had, unknown to myself, still an affection for Mme. de Nogales, the fact of finding her with this man would effect a complete cure. . . . But in matters of sentiment one cannot juggle with mathematical deductions. Syllogism thrives in the brain but perishes in the heart."

"So?"

"Make no mistake. . . . There is one thing that I cherish beyond everything, there is one sentiment that I put above all else and that I do not want to injure in any event; it is our friendship. It was born under such exceptional circumstances that nothing must jeopardize it. . . . Our cordial regard, so profound, since you saved my life, Eddie, is, and must remain, the pride of my existence. . . . That is why I ask you very loyally not to risk endangering it by committing an imprudence from which it is easy to escape. So let me give up, without regret, my stay at the Palace of Gizager. If you prefer to remain, do so, but let *me* go."

Roberts took a step forward. He put his two hands on Nicholson's shoulder and replied:

"I will tell you what I feel about it, Freddy. . . . I agree with you that your fears may be well founded and that your prudence may be the result of your most secret thoughts. I also agree that you might resist with difficulty the desire to live once more with her the hours that are past. I even allow that she might grant your request and share the same desire. . . . You see, I foresee all eventualities. . . . Very well. But nothing that could happen could endanger our great friendship. . . . Do I make myself clear? . . . I want to tell you that Mme. de Nogales, so far as I am concerned, has passed out of

my mind and that your feelings with regard to her could not change, in the slightest degree, our perfect good-will towards each other. Is that clear? . . . Now do you want to pack your suit-case? ”

Nicholson seemed perplexed.

“ Evidently. . . . If you . . . well, I mean to say . . . if we can meet Mme. de Nogales without risking our friendship. . . . ”

“ Of course, old boy! . . . Don't conjure up fancies. Ah! I understand quite well! Your imagination is very vivid for a Devonshire lad! You are a scrupulous and loyal soul. . . . It is very good, all that. . . . But you give it a miss—your suit-case and your idea of clearing out. . . . Besides, we can't, with decency, give the slip to His Highness, the Maharanee, and our friends, like that. . . . Hang up your clothes in the wardrobe and let us go to breakfast. The haddock, like the King of France, won't wait.”

“ Very well.”

“ Freddy, I know you inside out. You are a gay dog who hides his keen sensitiveness under a thin veneer of devil-me-care. . . . Here—I bet that at Harrow, when you were fourteen, you used to read Swinburne between two games of hockey.”

Roberts' infectious gaiety swept away Nicholson's last hesitations. He picked up his pipe and tobacco-pouch, his sun glasses, and said:

“ You are right, Eddie. At fifteen I was in love with Phyllis Walton who used to sing in *Miss Oui-Oui* at the Empire. I wrote her a passionate love letter . . . eight pages of romantic piffle. She sent me my letter back with these words written across it: ‘ Silly fool! do you

think it is with this sort of stuff that I can pay my petrol bills? ' "

" Poor fellow."

" It taught me a lesson."

Roberts took up his khaki cap, and turning, protested :

" Not it, because all your life you will continue to be Miss Oui-Oui's bashful lover."

XVIII

THE first day of the shooting party was over. The guests with the *shikaris* in sports cars without windscreens, had chased the herd of gazelles bounding across the desert. Others in butts near the lake had been shooting storks and wild deer. About six o'clock, everybody returned to the Palace of Gizager. It was a kind of summer residence, situated about five miles from Bangamer, at the edge of a small lake, whose turquoise water reflected the dainty acacia leaves. His Highness's guests had returned, some to the palace, others to the luxuriously appointed bungalows dotted about the park. Roberts occupied one of these little wooden villas by himself, some distance from the palace, at the very edge of the lake. Nicholson, Burgess and Stead were installed in three rooms next to each other on the ground floor of the left wing.

Before dinner, the four officers, in evening dress, were in Major Stead's room telling one another their experiences.

"Don't you think, Roberts, that shooting gazelles from a car is only for rheumatically old fogeys? . . . Why not a bath-chair? "

"I bagged eight black antelopes. And you, Burgess? "

"I snapped the Marquise de Pazanne six times as she missed six gazelles. That amused me much more than killing those graceful little creatures."

"You know that the Maharajah got a splendid right and a left—two storks that became separated from a flight."

"And the Maharanee? She did not join the party."

"She will dine with us this evening. . . . Roberts, give me a gasper. . . . By the way, is it true that you are going to London after your stay here?"

"Yes. . . . Nicholson and I are going to finish up our convalescent leave in Europe."

"Always inseparable? . . . The other day they were talking about you two at the Wheler Club at Meerut, and someone said you were a unique example of *camaraderie* that ought to be quoted in prize books for students at evening classes. . . . Castor and Pollux with an English setting!"

"You are pulling our legs, Stead!"

"On my honour! Listen, without paying you two compliments, your case is really exceptional, and one can understand this ideal brotherhood which has been imposed upon you neither by nature nor by motives of self-interest. Ah! My friend, there are so many people who don't hit it, who are envious and jealous of one another, that it is a great pleasure to meet those who keep up the good name of the human race."

The Maharajah's *aide-de-camp* appeared, interrupting Stead, who called out:

"Ah! Hallo, Ramda Singh! . . . It's dinner-time!"

"That's so. . . . But first of all, gentlemen, I want to give you an outline of our programme. This evening, a quiet dinner with His Highness. To-morrow, a big sand partridge drive. Those who do not bring down a hundred and fifty head will be expected to stand a bottle

of champagne. . . . The day after to-morrow, a gala dinner, followed by a ball. . . . After that, we shall see."

"Ah well, it sounds first-rate. . . . One never has a dull moment in the desert of Rajputana."

"I forgot to tell you that our new guests, who should have arrived the day before yesterday, are here at last. His Most Serene Highness Prince de Zorren and Mme. de Nogales."

Nicholson immediately inquired:

"Are they staying in the palace?"

"Yes. On the other side; their apartments are next to those of the Maharajah."

"You have seen them? What is Prince de Zorren like?"

"Small, slim, unimpressive in appearance. . . . Ah! there is nothing of the keen sportsman about him."

"How old?"

"Fifty-five, about. From what the Maharajah has said, he is a great collector of books . . . a world-wide bibliophile. A regular rat in a library."

Roberts remarked:

"And does this rat want to shoot antelopes?"

"Oh! I don't think His Serene Highness gets much pleasure out of handling a gun. . . . He has come to see the sacred tomes, the old seventeenth century water-colours and some rare books that the Maharajah treasures carefully in his bureau."

Burgess then became curious.

"And this lady, who has come with him? Who is she? . . . His secretary? . . . A poor relation? . . . His *dame de compagnie*? His fiancée? . . ."

"My dear sir, I really can't tell you. . . . They each

have their suite. . . . The rest does not concern us. . . . But . . .” The Indian, with a mischievous glance at Nicholson, added: “ Captain Nicholson told me the other evening that he knew this lady.”

Everyone turned to Nicholson, who blushed a little and at once replied:

“ Oh, very slightly. . . .”

Burgess insisted:

“ Then, my dear boy, put us wise! This mysterious couple, that is not a couple, travelling together as a couple, interests us.”

“ I assure you, Burgess, that I know nothing about them. I believe I met Mme. de Nogales in Egypt. All I can tell you is that she is pretty and very distinguished.”

“ Ah well, so much the better! That makes one more dancer. When I’ve been fox-hunting all day I find nothing so restful as fox-trotting all night.”

The officer followed the *aide-de-camp* and reached the little red drawing-room where Lady Hurling and the Marquise de Pazanne were enthusing over the old carved ivory figures in their glass cabinets. The party fell into groups. The Maharajah showed his friends some of his most precious knick-knacks; among others, some very valuable Chinese chimeras and some blue birds of the Ming and Kanghai periods, masks of Nepal gods and goddesses and some rose jade from Burma.

Then His Serene Highness Prince de Zorren and Mme. de Nogales were announced. Roberts and Nicholson turned sharply. They realized at once that the *aide-de-camp’s* description had been accurate. Prince de Zorren, an absolute personification of one of those ascetics, with a far-away expression caused by deep thought, with an ivory-

like complexion, finely-cut features but over tired by late hours, one of those alchemists of the Middle Ages who, in darkened rooms, hung with velvet curtains, try, with feverish zeal, to turn base metals into gold. He reminded one of a woodcut by Holbein or Albert Durer, more fitted to wear a monk's dress than dress clothes.

What a contrast to Alba! What he lacked in energy showed itself in her shining eyes, in the ardour of that Creole beauty which she irradiated in spite of herself.

One could not help thinking of an invalid near to whom a doctor had put a creature overflowing with the exuberance of youth to infuse into him the rich vitality of her generous blood. Alba's white dress, quite simple, but irreproachably cut, enhanced the feline suppleness of her figure, her dark complexion, her attractive décolleté and the irresistible charm of her glance.

Roberts and Nicholson, quite unmoved, were in turn presented. They bowed; Alba returned them a polite but indifferent smile. No emotion, not even a tinge of surprise on her perfectly composed face.

The Maharajah sat at dinner with Lady Hurling on his right and Mme. de Nogales on his left. His sister-in-law, the Maharanee, sat facing him. One noticed that she had ignored the customs of orthodox Hinduism and was, in consequence, able to sit unscandalized, in Western fashion, at dinner between Prince de Zorren and Major Roberts. He, in joking with the Maharanee, surreptitiously watched Nicholson, whose eyes never left Alba. She, on the contrary, affected to be absorbed in her conversation with the Maharajah and the Marquis de Pazanne; she seemed to ignore Nicholson entirely, and also his friend as well.

Roberts, from time to time, between two snatches of conversation, argued to himself; vivid thoughts flashed through his mind spasmodically.

"What a farce! . . . There she is . . . at dinner, with two men who have loved her. . . . Whoever would suspect it, seeing her indifference. . . . It is incredible. . . . It is really amusing. . . . As for me, I find it comic, because I am out of it all; but poor Freddy seems very ill at ease. . . ."

The Maharanee suddenly turned to him.

"Isn't it so, major? Isn't it written in your Bible that Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise? . . . Why doesn't one hear what became of the serpent? "

"I can tell you what he is doing, Your Highness. He is lolling in an armchair waiting for the next chance of seeing an apple eaten. . . ."

A turbaned servant handed a curry seasoned with eighteen different spices. Roberts continued the thread of his thoughts.

"It is obvious that Freddy is taking this very seriously. The poor fellow can't eat. . . . I was right when I told him that romance would be his undoing! . . . There he is, conquered by the pernicious charm of this woman. . . . Ah, my poor old man, if I could inoculate you with a little of my indifference. . . . But let her alone, confound it! If not, you will embark once more on . . ."

Mrs. Stokes this time interrupted Roberts' meditations.

"Have you seen the Taj Mahal, major? "

"Oh yes, Mrs. Stokes. . . ."

"I . . . I got up at four in the morning to see it in full moonlight."

"How did it strike you? "

"Like a nightmare in white marble. When I get back to New York I shall have to change the colour of my bathroom."

Towards eleven o'clock in the evening, Roberts and Nicholson, before going to their rooms, strolled up and down along the side of the lake. Roberts spoke openly, with the calm assurance of a man who was not troubled for the moment. He was at heart very pleased to make this statement. The first evening, the news of the arrival of Alba had, in spite of himself, a little upset him, but during the night he had recovered his mental balance.

"Could you believe, my dear Freddy, that anyone could drop people in such a graceful manner. . . . She bowed to us as if she'd never seen us. . . . Not a glance during the meal . . . not a word afterwards."

"Yes. . . . She looked at you once during dinner, Eddie. . . . A very curious look it was, too. . . ."

"I never noticed it. I was joking with the Maharanee. And you? Did you exchange a glance with her? You should have done so openly, if only to annoy the old sorcerer who is escorting her. . . . He reminds me of those old restaurant waiters that one comes across in cheap *pensions* on the continent. . . ."

"Don't joke about it, Eddie. . . . The reappearance of Mme. de Nogales is no laughing matter. . . ."

"I know that right enough. . . . Buck up! What the devil does it matter. . . . Do as I do . . . laugh . . . and now! And if anyone came and deceived His Most Serene Highness, I should give him a hand and say, 'Well played!'"

Nicholson did not seem to follow his friend's conversa-

tion. He stopped and looked across the lake with its dark water shimmering under the night breeze and remarked :

"She is more beautiful than ever. . . . Is it her white dress and the joy of having at last got rid of her husband? . . . But why has she chosen this old ruin? Could she have come to the end of her tether as regards married life? Ah, I would like to know. . . . I feel sure she must have suffered, that she must have had a bad time! . . ."

Roberts looked at his friend with curiosity. He sighed, patted him on the shoulder, and said :

"I say! Come back to earth, Freddy. . . . Here you go, full tilt into the realm of hypotheses! Mme. de Nogales lives her own life. Let us say no more about it. What can it matter to us whether she has chosen a Balkan Prince, a prize-fighter or a young film star? And as we stand now, that is the least of our troubles! You are really worrying me with your continual fits of melancholy. . . . What's the good of banging your head against fate? . . . I know very well that it is your sentimental and Byronesque nature cropping up again. You have seen once more the beautiful apparition in white. She has quite ignored you, and here you are, all upset. . . . Look here! I should have preferred, for your peace of mind, that she had behaved to you like a common woman. I should have liked her to have winked at you during dinner, surreptitiously to have squeezed your hand in the drawing-room with a little tickle in the palm and a nod of the head meaning: 'Come, my darling, shall we be as we used to be?' Yes, Freddy, I should have liked that, because then your romantic illusions would have vanished right away and you would have been absolutely cured."

"But, my dear Eddie, you are moving in a vicious

circle. If Mme. de Nogales had been capable of acting like that I should never have fallen in love with her."

"Is that a reason for caring for her still? One does not love only one woman in one's life. Go along with you, you behave and speak like a callow youth. . . . Werther in football kit! Besides, you are merely bandying idle words. You are still suffering from the shock of this meeting. . . . It is excusable. But I warn you, old boy, I'll give you twenty-four hours to get over it. . . . Promise, eh? Honestly I should be frightfully upset to see you go off the deep end over this."

"You, you are strong! You can talk about it without feeling it."

"Strong? No. . . . But I am older than you are. . . . That accounts for many things. . . . Well, enough said, Freddy. To-morrow morning we'll get up early."

Roberts accompanied his friend as far as his room. Nicholson was silent. At the door Roberts reiterated good-heartedly his recipe:

"A good night's rest and no more dreams, eh?"

"You are asking too much."

Roberts dropped his voice.

"Very well, in that case, my dear Freddy, here is my last little pill: in case this serious crisis continues to-morrow arrange to talk to her after the shoot; then for your great third act, try and get two hours with her in strict privacy. . . . You follow me?"

He lowered his voice and whispered in his friend's ear:

"If I can be of any help in lending you my bungalow, don't be afraid to ask. . . . I'll make some excuse and send my orderly to Bangamer . . . see. . . . Aren't I a real brother, eh—what?"

By way of reply, Nicholson grasped his friend's hand tightly and went into his room. Roberts, quietly whistling a *blues*, strolled in the direction of the park to his isolated little villa. His mind was perfectly at ease. Not a care except regret in seeing his friend's sentimental equilibrium upset. All the same, poor boy! He was one of those who take the prevarications of love very seriously and who concentrate on one woman the whole amount of their desires. He had not arrived at that stage of scepticism which heals wounds and teaches luckless lovers that the relativity of time applies also to the affairs of the heart. When, indeed, would he understand that it is necessary for lovers to make their vows conform to the realities of life just as Einstein knew how to make the rays of light obey his laws?

The night was fresh. It was good to be in this flowery oasis embellished by wealth of a Hindu potentate. Roberts kept whistling to himself. He could not believe that this little sentimental crisis would last. Amusing thoughts now passed through his mind. . . . He saw Prince de Zorren dressed as a mediæval sorcerer sitting on a large pile of dusty books; Mme. Nogales challenged him and said: "There are two men here who have known me already. . . . You will be clever if you can tell me who they are. . . ." Fantastic pictures welled up in his mind, absurd ideas which hardly took shape, the buffooneries of the subconscious mind. Roberts felt that his heart, at any rate, was now quite cured. It seemed to him that he had formerly loved in another life, this beautiful woman in white, that his comrade admired so much. At one time he had believed in the successive reincarnations which is the Brahmin creed and which keeps the yogi in

a state of ecstasy on his bed of spikes. But to endanger his peace of mind and above all his great friendship with Nicholson for the beautiful eyes of Mme. de Nogales? What madness! . . .

He reached his bungalow and found his orderly waiting for him, rolled up in a rug. Roberts went into his room on the ground floor, for the little villa had no upper storey, and switched on the electric light. The orderly at once drew his attention to an envelope on the table.

"What is it?"

"One of the Maharajah's chauffeurs brought it."

Roberts looked at the address. He started in astonishment. It was Mme. de Nogales' writing. He did not dare to open the envelope. An inexplicable fear paralysed him.

He asked sharply:

"When did this letter arrive?"

"Scarcely half an hour ago, sir."

"All right. . . . You can go. . . . Call me to-morrow at seven o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

Left alone, Roberts at length broke the seal of the envelope bearing the Maharajah's coat-of-arms. The message was not long, but it was written in French for greater safety.

"I have come to Bangamer with the single purpose of seeing you again and explaining everything. It is absolutely essential that we have a tête-à-tête together to-morrow. Arrange to join me during the shoot. I kiss you as of old.—Alba."

XIX

ROBERTS' stupefaction was unutterable. He read and re-read the lines; beads of perspiration on his forehead, his heart beating, incapable of thinking clearly, of knowing whether it was a catastrophe, a great happiness or a hoax.

He at once dismissed the idea of a joke in such bad taste. It was Alba's writing. He knew it so well. Seated at his table, the sheet of paper lying between his elbows, he studied every word of the message. . . . First of all Alba *tutoyaite* him. Amazing familiarity, because in the old days she only addressed him in that way in the most passionate hours of their *tête-à-tête*. . . . "*With the single purpose of seeing you again and explaining everything. . . .*" Could it be possible that she still thought of him, that she had really suggested to her travelling companion to come to the Maharajah's house because she had heard of his presence there? This overwhelming desire to speak to him to-morrow, during the shoot, seemed to prove it.

Then suddenly Roberts asked himself if by chance Nicholson had not received an identical letter or almost. . . . Maybe she wanted to amuse herself, at their expense. . . . Why not, after all? A coquette who is

bored is capable of inventing any little Machiavellian game. It would be amusing to see two men under the same roof eaten up with jealousy and powerless. She had already tasted the mischievous pleasure, this *Schadenfreude*, when she received letters from her two lovers who had met by chance in Fort No. 4. Favoured by fortune she found them both within her clutches. . . . A splendid opportunity to play with their feelings.

Roberts got up and threw off his coat. Standing in front of the wardrobe mirror, he took the studs out of his evening shirt. In doing so he saw once more in the mirror the white paper lying on the table and shrugged his shoulders.

"To think that in reading that, I have been deeply moved. . . . The truth is we are always fools. . . . They have only to lift up their little finger and then we are kneeling at their feet, or rather begging, like fox-terriers waiting for a piece of sugar! I'll bet a hundred rupees to two annas that Nicholson has found a similar *billet-doux* in his room. . . . He will jump for joy; he won't sleep a wink all night, he will take it as the real thing. . . . He'll roll in the mud if the triumphant Alba tells him to. And, as for myself, I shall do the same! . . . You're a fine sort of chap to give lessons to other people. After all, it gave me a regular shock when I saw her handwriting on the envelope. . . . 'I kiss you as of old.' Yes, darling. . . . Go on, you interest me! . . . There! Your *billet-doux*, this is what I'll do with it. . . ."

He went up to the table, took the note, and stopped dead as he was about to tear it. He thought: "No, it would be stupid to destroy this piece of evidence. On the

contrary, I will keep it carefully, and, thanks to her, I shall say to Nicholson when he confesses to me that Alba has written to him: 'There, old boy, I don't make any mystery about it. . . . See, she has laid the same trap for me. . . . And if after that you still have any doubt in your mind, your blindness has no further excuse.'"

He folded the letter with care, put it on the table at his side, and went to bed. Real satisfaction soothed his recent emotion. The idea of absolutely curing his poor friend, who was a victim of amorous exaltation, seemed to him to be excellent from every point of view.

He tried to sleep while thinking of the antelopes that he had shot in the open. Then, all of a sudden, a simple little remark of Nicholson's made the startled *black buck* disappear as if by enchantment. . . . His friend had said, at the side of the lake: "She looked at you during dinner, Eddie. . . . It was a curious look, too. . . ."

That Alba, so cold, so apparently indifferent, should have glanced at him without his knowing, at Roberts himself? It was true, for Nicholson had noticed it . . . so then, this glance, this letter, this longing to speak to him. . . . Did Alba by chance speak the truth, and did she really want to meet him *tête-à-tête*, him alone, without any ironical thought behind it, without any *arrière-pensée* of coquetry? He switched on the light, he could not resist the temptation of reading the message once more. He took it up, held it to the lamp, devoured each word, each letter. . . . His conviction, that he was the sport of a cruel game, fell to pieces. He put the letter upon the table and considered the problem in its new light.

If by chance Alba was sincere? If every word of her note was true? What should he do? Evidently it would

be necessary for him to have a *tête-à-tête* with her during the shoot. . . . " *I have come with the single purpose of seeing you again and explaining everything. . . .*" Ah well, he would listen politely to her explanations. Unless he refused a meeting in order to make her understand that the past was over?

He hesitated. His reason told him to cling firmly to his decision. But there were some gaps in the train of his reasoning through which the desire to speak to Alba alone gradually insinuated itself. He discovered also good excuses for not obeying scrupulously the dictates of his conscience. What did he risk, he, a strong man, now with a hardened heart? He was undisputed master of the situation.

The next morning he was in such a hurry to know, that half an hour before the start of the shoot he went into his friend's room; he was lacing his boots.

"Slept well, Freddy?"

"Yes. . . . And you?"

"Very well. . . . Anything fresh?"

"Nothing, old man. . . . Why, what did you think there would be?"

"I just thought I'd ask. . . . Did you dream of her?"

"No."

He pretended to joke.

"You haven't been having a secret little correspondence with the wicked woman in white."

"I say, my dear Eddie, your jokes are not very funny this morning."

Nicholson's sincerity seemed so obvious to him that he was sorry that he had insisted. Then, Alba had not

written to him. The fact rather upset him. He would have preferred that Nicholson should have shown him a note of the same kind, that he had received, because the position would have been much simpler and everything would have ended in a burst of laughter from them both.

Bothered, he did not insist, and went out to hail Burgess, who was taking out some cartridges near the door of his room.

At eight o'clock everybody was assembled round the cars. Roberts went up to the *aide-de-camp* and asked him discreetly:

"I suppose you couldn't manage to put me in the same car as Prince de Zorren and Mme. de Nogales?"

"The Prince is not going to the shoot. But Mme. de Nogales will be in the same car as the Marquis de Pazanne and Captain Freeman. . . . I can shift Freeman if you like."

"That's the idea. . . . Thanks, colonel."

The cars started off one after the other.

Roberts got in with the Marquis. Mme. de Nogales sat between them. The chauffeur and the *shikari* were in front. As the car sped along the sandy road Roberts and the Marquis de Pazanne talked with animation. Mme. de Nogales, who maintained an attitude of icy politeness towards Roberts, replied readily to the remarks of the Frenchman, but ignored the other's existence. They pulled up at a sort of shooting-box on the top of some bare rising ground. The *shikari* got out to get his instructions from the head keeper. The Marquis, being curious, also left the car to study a map of the surrounding district that was lying on the table.

Mme. de Nogales, who remained silent, scarcely turned

her face towards Roberts to say to him, under her breath, in French :

" You got my little note? "

" Yes."

" I am anxious to speak to you. Make an opportunity either before or after lunch."

" Good. . . . But no one must have any suspicion. Above all, Nicholson."

" Your great friend? "

" Yes."

" Then arrange it so that he does not see us."

" Very well."

The voice of reason had been stifled. Roberts was unable to reply : " No, I do not want to hear you." He immediately took stock of the situation and perhaps would have retracted his acquiescence, when all of a sudden, under the rug, he felt Mme. de Nogales' little gloved hand seeking his, which it found; she gave it a gentle squeeze. Whereupon his reason was entirely overpowered.

The Marquis de Pazanne got back into the car and imparted his discoveries on the map. Roberts, however, who had given way and had not experienced the discreet pressure of her dainty hand without pleasure, tried to recover his self-control. Mentally, he boasted : " Yes, my dear. . . . I follow your little game all right. . . . You are even more artful than I thought. . . . Your little game is very subtle. . . . Instead of fooling us both at the same time, it will be me first and then Nicholson. . . . The panther plays with two lambs . . . claws first one and then the other. . . . We're going to see some fun."

The partridge drive lasted three hours. A continuous fusillade crackled at the edge of the stumpy trees and prickly bushes which grew near the little irrigation canal that watered parsimoniously that part of the desert. The "cease fire" was heard at last. Roberts watched for his opportunity. He left his position, and a few hundred yards away he saw Alba, who had just handed over her gun to the *shikari* in order to powder herself and use her lipstick. He made a sign to her to follow him. She immediately obeyed. Ten minutes later they were seated against a heap of sand, hidden from indiscreet eyes by some dusty shrubs.

Roberts spoke first. During the shoot he had had time to regain his self-control, to forget Mme. de Nogales' tender gesture in the car. He spoke first, to give the right tone to the conversation, to show her from the very first words that he was no longer the Eddie of former days and that, if he consented to be alone with her, it was by pure politeness.

"You want to offer me certain explanations, madame, and I do not wish to deny myself. . . . However, you will realize that I have had good reason to make you understand that, owing to your former silence, I have the right to be silent to-day. . . . I am listening."

He looked at Alba, his face unmoved. Alba in turn looked at him. The indifference that she had affected in the Maharajah's drawing-room disappeared. Her delicate features were lit up by a smile, by a pretty little pout, full of reproaches. Her voice had also taken a caressing timbre.

"Oh! . . . Eddie. . . . What a tone to use when you speak to me. . . . Have I travelled so many miles over

this desolate country to find myself greeted with cold words, an almost hostile expression? . . . No! Don't reply yet. . . . I feel sure that you are going to persist in your cantankerous and wicked mood. . . . As if I had done you some wrong! "

" Oh."

Roberts' protest escaped from his lips in spite of himself.

" Yes, I repeat it, as if I had willingly done you an injury. . . . Well, it is to dispel that illusion that I have sought this meeting. . . . Whether you wish it or not, we have something in the past which will prevent us for ever from being indifferent. . . . At least that is my feeling. We ought therefore to be frank with each other. . . . You have just now reproached me for my silence, when you were over there on the Afghan frontier. It is easy to accuse a woman at a distance without knowing anything of her life, which is sometimes difficult, sometimes dramatic. . . . You shall see things as they really were, Eddie. Then you will have the right to judge me more fairly. . . . First, I may tell you, that I heard after your departure, things that horrified me. You know what an inveterate gambler my husband was. . . . I deplored his passion. I believed him to be a victim of an irresistible obsession. Much later, too late alas, I discovered that he cheated and that he had certainly robbed you of your £3,000. . . .

" But wait, let us go back to the events after you sailed for India. At a large party in London, my husband lost a considerable sum, that he was unable to pay. When we left, he said to me: 'To-morrow morning we shall go by air to Paris and then make our way to Egypt.' I agreed to go with him, because

I still believed that he was the injured party. When we got to Cairo he played again. One evening, at a rich Egyptian's, who had parties at his villa de Kasr el Nil, my husband was again unfortunate enough to lose a thousand pounds. The lucky winner was a young officer, Lieutenant Nicholson, who happened to be there and enjoyed a game with my husband. The day after the fatal night, my husband said to me: 'I lost a thousand pounds yesterday evening. I cannot pay Lieutenant Nicholson. If my failure to meet my obligations is made public, Cairo will be too hot for me, or rather for both of us. . . . You will have to go and see this officer and get him to let me off that debt. . . .' My husband's cynicism dumbfounded me. But in the face of necessity, in the face of being as much as him the victim of a scandal, I went to call on Lieutenant Nicholson. . . . A humiliating position that I have never forgotten. . . . Nicholson very kindly agreed to say no more about the thousand pounds, and asked me to have tea. Soon, I saw him every day. He paid court to me, very correctly indeed. And I must say that he never gave me to understand that he expected from me anything for his cancellation of the debt. But could I, with any decency, after such treatment, say to this kind fellow: 'I have got you to cancel your debt, good-bye, and thank you!' In spite of the fact that my conscience struck at the idea of offering myself without enthusiasm, my loyalty also revolted at the thought of treating Nicholson so basely. At length, that which was bound to occur, happened . . . without love, without *élan*. I granted the request of the young officer, who adored me and whom I found nice, nothing more.

"One day, sickened by my own conduct, by my husband's cynicism, I had a violent scene with Miguel. It was terrible. In a paroxysm of rage he asked me if I was fool enough to believe that he played a straight game. . . . He openly confessed his trickery. . . . I, at once, asked him: 'And Roberts? . . . You robbed him as well.' I learned the truth, the cards were faked . . . the coups at banco were arranged beforehand. . . . You, my poor friend, were the victim of this cardsharpener. . . . And you were surprised at my silence. . . . My great lover! . . . The man whom I have adored so much, cheated by my husband! . . . I should have sent tender messages. I should have written passionately, but, caught in the net, I had to accept this new lover. . . . Think, Eddie, I could not do otherwise. . . . Alone, forgotten, silence was the only thing, in my tragic position. . . . I am a woman, a simple woman, alas! like many others. With you I deceived my husband for the first time, because I loved you, as you know quite well! Later, cruel necessity compelled me to share, without passion, the love of a young boy who was madly devoted to me. . . . Some do that sort of thing for greed or advancement. In my case I did it to save my husband, whom I thought honest. I was afraid of an immediate scandal. . . . I was wrong, I admit it. I ought to have let things follow their course, and, taking advantage of the opportunity, divorced this crook.

"As it happened, you two, you and Nicholson, were at the same station in India. . . . How could I keep up a double correspondence? The departure of this young lieutenant put an end to a liaison which I carried on without enthusiasm. I had no desire to write to him.

My only mental anguish was, that I could not clear myself in your eyes. . . . Who knows what Nicholson and you have said to each other? Two isolated comrades have no secrets between one another. You have doubtless learned part of what you thought was the truth. . . . I swear to you, Eddie, that the thought of being wrongly judged by you, was torture to me. . . . And then the war with the Afghan tribes began. My first, my only thought was to telegraph to you, to wish you good luck. My cable was accepted without any guarantee that it would be delivered. . . . I remember the wording: 'In danger, my heart will always be with you.' Did you get it? "

"No."

"Naturally. . . . But are you beginning to understand more clearly what took place? Are you still going to talk to me in the icy tones of a high court judge? "

There was a pause. Then Roberts slowly shook his head.

"No, Alba. You have just shed a new light on all that has happened."

The softness of his voice bore witness to his new conviction. His look was no longer distant, reproving. However, without hostility, with a shade of regret in his tone, as if he did not want to refer to the subject, he added:

"But . . . this Prince de Zorren? "

"Ah! Eddie. . . . In that case, I also owe you some explanations. . . . You ask me the meaning of my presence in India with him. I will tell you. As soon as Nicholson went away, my married life was a hell.

My husband's cynicism became such that I could foresee the day when I should be obliged to pay, in kind, his gambling debts. So, I left him definitely. I collected the few things that I possessed and went to live alone at Luxor. It was there that I was introduced to Prince de Zorren. He became interested in my misfortunes. This savant, because, beyond everything, this aristocrat is a man of letters and an art lover, suggested a change of scene, to make me forget my misfortunes. He had a platonic affection for me. . . . Why, it is enough to look at him, Eddie, to see that he has nothing of the Lovelace about him, and to realize that the study of old manuscripts inspires him more than any new conquest. . . . Maybe I have attracted him because I was not too stupid and I became interested in his researches? However that may be, he said to me one day: 'Alba, I should like to help you to free yourself from the bad patch in your life. I ask you absolutely nothing in exchange, beyond your friendship and your company, so long as it pleases you to give them to me. . . . If you are not afraid of public opinion, and people will be sure to say that I am your lover, come with me to India, where I want to go, in order to study. . . . The curious things you will see there, will distract your thoughts.' I could not refuse an offer so generous and so loyal. . . . That is why, ignoring the scandalmongers and the gossips of a world that I heartily despise, I started for Bombay."

"Is it really possible, Alba, that your relationship with the Prince is platonic? "

"I swear it. . . . I was determined that you should know the truth, Eddie, because in my eyes, you are the only person who counts. The rest . . . I don't care a

straw what they think. . . . Besides, you may have a chance of verifying it before long."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing . . . simply that I am not telling you a lie."

Another pause. The heat was very great, and the burning sun caused a mirage on the horizon of the endless plain. But Eddie and Alba did not notice it. They did not see the imaginary lake over there, which stretched out, near the aloe trees, its deceiving mirror. The outside world no longer existed. Alba glanced clandestinely at her neighbour who, without saying anything, was looking at her well-shaped legs, crossed under the short skirt of her smart beige sports costume.

Suddenly Roberts looked up and sighed approvingly:

"My poor little Alba."

She gave him a sad smile, almost childlike, and while she played with a dry twig she replied very softly, as if she were confessing:

"And as I drew near to India my thoughts went out to you anew. . . . Do you understand that, Eddie? . . . The eclipse was at an end. . . . My eclipse of love was the tragedy with my husband and also with . . . your friend. . . . On the boat which brought me to Bombay I felt my heart each day draw nearer to yours. . . . My heart which was faithless, only in appearance. Immediately I landed I made inquiries. I heard that Major Roberts, V.C., had become the hero of the Afghan war. . . . My pride! My happiness, on learning that! . . . I had only one desire: to see you. . . . Then, at the reception at Delhi at the Viceroy's, to whom the Prince de Zorren had a special introduction from the Foreign

Minister, I was told that you were going to shoot with the Maharajah of Bangamer. It was not difficult to get an invitation, especially as the Maharajah was a personal friend of His Most Serene Highness.

"That is the whole of my story. So now you know why I wanted half an hour's *tête-à-tête*. I had to clear myself in your eyes. . . . I was determined to have it, because other people can think what they like about me. . . . But you! . . . Ah! no. . . . Not you, Eddie. . . . So then. . . . After this recapitulation of the past, which became sorrowful the day that fate shattered our love in the zenith of its joy, we have nothing further to say to each other . . . we shall go on greeting one another casually and exchanging banalities in public. . . . And the day before I leave, you will wish me *bon voyage*, shaking my hand very correctly in the galleries of the palace. As for me . . . me? I shall see you go with that little secret pull that regret gives to one's heartstrings, the regret at seeing the man whose kisses, in the past, used to thrill me, pass out of my life."

Alba became silent. The little dry twig cracked between her fingers. To cover her nervousness, she looked at herself in her mirror and powdered herself needlessly, then she suggested:

"Ah! . . . They will be wondering what has become of us . . . we must rejoin the rest of the party."

Roberts' face had suddenly become grave. But it had not the severity that it had previously assumed. With a wave of the hand he stopped Alba, who was getting up:

"No . . . we have not said all. . . . Stay."

"But, Eddie . . . it is nearly lunch time. We cannot decently reappear together when everyone is at

table. . . . Mind you, personally I don't care a bit. . . . Only on account of the Maharajah, it would perhaps be more correct if . . ."

"You are right. . . . On account of the Maharajah and still more on account of Nicholson."

Roberts' attitude astonished Alba.

"On account of Nicholson? . . . Do you have to obtain Nicholson's permission for us to speak to each other?"

The major got up.

"I will explain to you later. . . . Alba, it is absolutely necessary for me to see you to-night during the ball. . . . I, too, have something to say to you."

"Very well . . . we will find an opportunity after dinner."

She held out her two hands for Roberts to help her to rise. She jumped up lightly, found herself face to face with him, and had difficulty in checking the longing she felt to throw herself into his arms. For a few seconds he held her hands in his. Their eyes tried to read the mystery of their secret thoughts, that new riddle of the future that fate had suddenly thrown across their path. . . . Roberts, the first to turn away his head, regretfully let go the two hands which had abandoned themselves and repeated in a troubled voice:

"Yes . . . this evening. . . . I must speak to you . . . this evening. . . ."

XX

TEA was served on the edge of the lake. At one of the tables General Sir Ronald Armstrong was pointing out the chief features of the scene to Prince de Zorren and Mrs. Stokes. The Maharajah, in another corner, was telling Lady Hurling and the Marquise de Pazanne how he had killed his last two tigers on a *machan* near Dohlpin. Roberts, Stead, Freeman and Nicholson were chatting a little farther on.

When Stead and Freeman got up to take a turn in the antelope reserve, Roberts recounted his prowess to his friend.

"My rifle, old man, was red hot after one partridge drive. . . ."

But Nicholson interrupted him :

"Eddie, I want to speak to you particularly."

His comrade's serious tone surprised him.

"Well, go on, Freddy, I'm listening."

"No, not here. . . . Come by the side of the park."

They got up. When they were out of earshot of the guests sitting on the terrace, Nicholson stopped dead.

"Eddie . . . I heard a remark before lunch which surprised me. . . . Young asked Freeman, 'What has become of Roberts?' To which Freeman replied :

'Roberts? . . . I saw him just now deep in conversation with Mme. de Nogales.' I simply wanted to ask you if it were true? "

"Yes and no, old boy. . . . Deep in conversation and behind the trees might seem to suggest that I had a somewhat too intimate interview with Mme. de Nogales, which would be quite untrue. The fact is that we were neighbouring guns, and I helped her to open her gun which had jambed. We talked for a few minutes, and that is all."

Nicholson's silence did not augur well.

Roberts continued :

"Come, Freddy, I don't understand why you put on this almost tragic manner. You have taken our friend's remarks too seriously. I honestly don't see why the few polite words which we exchanged should worry you."

"It is impossible that you did not allude to the past. . . . There was no one there, so you could both speak freely. . . ."

"I'll tell you what we said. . . . It was not very dramatic, I assure you, nor romantic, nor even poetic. . . . This is exactly the end of our sentimental dialogue :

" ' Well, Alba, how's the heart? ' "

" ' Quite calm. ' "

" ' Such is life. "

' One loves, one forgets,
One bears no ill-will.
Love does not kill. '

"Whereupon she assured me that she was not the Prince's mistress. I did not believe her. And as her rifle was all right again I handed it back to her and wished her luck. That's our deep conversation."

"I believe you."

" Her absolute indifference to us—you and me—isn't it quite in keeping with her story? "

" That's true."

" Very well then, old man. A false alarm. . . . It seems that you do not want to follow my advice! To laugh at all this sentimental nonsense. . . . Laugh! Laugh! . . . Why, I knew a French diplomat in Paris who had plenty of spirit, and whose Voltairian irony won my admiration. He said to me: ' When Eros aims an arrow at me from his bow, I show him the seat of my trousers. Then the little fellow turns away disgusted.' "

" You are not serious."

" Happily, I am."

" Anyway, if this evening I have a chance, I promise you I shall try and speak to Alba. I must know definitely. This uncertainty is unbearable. . . . Don't you want me to talk to her? "

" What an ideal! On the contrary, I hope you will. You are quite right, it is far better to know where you are. If Mme. de Nogales still loves you, and you reciprocate, so much the better. If not you will be satisfied, and I am sure you will be permanently cured. A little painful, perhaps, but the wound will heal with time."

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Dancing was taking place in the rooms that opened out on to Lake Gizager. Roberts, very pensive, was smoking on the terracc. His calmness vanished as the hour of his meeting with Alba drew near. He knew that Nicholson also wanted to speak to her. That, in itself, was to him a matter of indifference. Or, at least, if he was not absolutely indifferent, at any rate it did not upset him. Especially after the attitude she had adopted at the

shoot. What hit him hardest was Nicholson's remark after tea. Apparently his friend had taken umbrage at their *tête-à-tête*. If he noticed again, this evening, that Roberts repeated this offence, what would happen? Beyond all other contingencies, the thought of annoying his friend, unintentionally, worried Roberts. However, his intentions were perfectly honourable and loyal. He was taking advantage of this next meeting to explain quite frankly to Alba what she did not yet know. If absolutely necessary, Nicholson could hear what he intended to say. He could judge the true fellowship of his friend.

Roberts threw away his cigarette. The jazz band from Bombay was playing. The Maharajah, who did not dance, went about from group to group, pleased to entertain his guests, who were joined by English residents from Bangamer, who had come by car to the *soirée*.

Nicholson appeared with Mlle. de Cassano and Captain Young. He asked his friend :

"What are you doing here, Roberts? "

"Nothing. I've just had a fox-trot. I was getting a breath of air."

He took Nicholson aside.

"Have you spoken to her? "

"Not yet. I asked her to dance, but she left me, making some excuse. . . . She does not seem very anxious to talk to me."

"See if you can get another chance."

"Yes, I'll try."

Nicholson disappeared with Mlle. de Cassano for the next dance. Captain Young asked Roberts to go and have a *chota peg*. He was just on the point of accepting when Alba appeared in the doorway of the room. She made

a discreet sign to him. He thanked Young and, leaving him, strolled casually towards the end of the terrace. Alba followed him at a distance. He went down into the park. At the side of the lake there was a wooden summer-house with a landing-stage. It had a bench facing the lake. It was an ideal spot for talking unobserved.

Alba joined him.

"I am punctual, Eddie. . . . You said eleven o'clock. Here I am."

"Thank you, Alba. It is absolutely necessary for us to talk frankly."

"With pleasure. . . . I notice, I am glad to say, that you no longer affect the icy tone that you did this morning. . . . You are no longer cross with me."

"Don't joke, Alba. My tone is no longer hostile, in fact it is almost sad, because we have, or rather I have, something serious to say to you. . . . Do you remember the end of our conversation at the shoot? . . . I said that we must take certain precautions on account of our host, and above all on account of Nicholson."

"Yes. . . . I did not quite understand, I confess."

"You will understand when I tell you that Freddy and I are friends . . . Alba; I hate lies, subterfuges and everything that is not frank. . . . He and I are friends."

"And so . . . because you are friends, we have not the right to talk to one another alone? . . . Come . . . come, Eddie, I assure you I don't see what you are driving at."

"I must explain. You do not seem to realize what true friendship between two men means."

"Oh, yes."

"No. It is more than you think. It is something

pure and solid, it is a diamond without flaw. It is quite different from love. Do you follow me? In the lover's heart there are storms. One desires. One hates and then suddenly one adores. There are jerks, ups and downs . . . fever. . . . In love there are all the surprises of a tropical climate. Friendship is more noble, it is above the sudden changes of passion. . . . It moves in a celestial plane where that which is best in us comes to the top. . . . I'm afraid I don't explain myself very well. . . ."

"You explain yourself very well, Eddie. I see that you are obsessed by one idea: to do nothing which can offend your friend, not even talk to me alone. It is strange . . . very strange. . . . Such scruples are rare. . . . Yes, yes! . . . Only I should understand it better if I were, for example, Nicholson's wife. For a true friend to refuse, owing to his loyalty, to cause pain to the husband, his friend, *that* is understandable. . . . It does not happen very often, but there are, of course, some fine natures like yours, Eddie, which are capable of it. . . . However, between you and me, I don't see . . ."

Roberts did not answer. He was uneasy. He wanted to speak, but he could not bring himself to do so. At last he exclaimed:

"You have no doubt that Nicholson loves you madly!"

These words, blurted out by Roberts, made Alba start. The fascinating smile that had not left her face, disappeared instantly before the crudeness of Roberts' remark. . . . Not for long, for a moment afterwards her face resumed its pleasant expression.

"You say that Nicholson still loves me madly? How do you know it?"

Roberts raised his head. He realized that he was not

able to stop in his confidences. Besides, with his soldier-like frankness, he did not wish to do so; he could not gloss over the truth. He replied:

"I know it because he has told me. . . . The poor fellow is suffering."

"You have no secrets between you, naturally?"

"No."

Alba, on her part, was silent. She gazed into the water of the lake, the calm water that faintly reflected the starry night. Her little foot moved up and down nervously in its gold brocade shoe. Her two hands squeezed her lace handkerchief, pulled it, twisted it. Then suddenly, as if an unexpected thought had illuminated her reflections, she turned to Roberts with a searching glance.

"How long have you two been bound by this edifying friendship?"

"Since the Afghan war."

Then, slowly weighing each word, she inquired again:

"And at that time you knew that he loved me?"

"Yes. . . . I knew it."

"And he, at that time, knew all about you and me. . . ."

"Yes. We have been loyally frank in the matter."

Alba's expression remained enigmatical for some seconds. At length she sighed and rose to go. Roberts put out his hand immediately and grasped her wrists to stop her.

"Where are you going, Alba?"

"I am leaving you alone, my dear. . . . I should not like to do anything to spoil so perfect a friendship. . . . Let me go."

"No! Why must you. . . . Stay! We can talk here without danger. . . ."

"For me, yes. . . . Not for you two. . . . So it is better for us to separate, Eddie. You were right to tell me all that. Now I see clearly. Your duty is obvious. Nicholson must not know of our meeting. . . . This time we will definitely shake hands and say adieu. . . ."

She gave a little hollow laugh. She turned her head so as not to show her emotion to Roberts. She murmured:

"A fond farewell. . . . I, who had come here so full of happiness at the thought of seeing you . . . with such eagerness, with the single longing to clear myself in your eyes. . . . I have made a mistake, yes, but I came loyally to confess myself to you, the only man in my life. . . . Ah! what mockery. . . . It is stupid to weep. . . . How could I imagine that between us would come that imbecile whom I have never loved! "

She was standing up, held back by Roberts, her agitated face turned towards the park. Then, spontaneously, Roberts seized her two bare arms, drew her towards him, holding her prisoner. Face to face, he said to her in a forced voice:

"Alba! . . . Don't go. . . . I beg you. I beg you. . . ."

She was helpless before him. A rag doll in his powerful arms. She whispered in weary accents:

"I must go. . . . You know it quite well. . . ."
Then still lower; "On account of your great friend. . . ."

Roberts repressed an exclamation. . . . Then Alba insisted in a pitiful voice:

"Don't let us upset him. . . . But let me, at least, kiss you for the last time."

Roberts, in reply, clasped her savagely in his arms. Alba's head fell on his shoulder. He spoke, lips close to lips. The demon tempted him to kiss those lips that were so close. He strove like a desperate man whilst Alba, with her eyes closed, repeated almost unconsciously :

"Eddie! . . . My darling! I am wretched. . . . I love you still. . . ."

Her words died on Roberts' lips. Alba's bare arms slid round his neck. She hugged him tightly, with voluptuous brutality. The mad intoxication of days gone by surged in their minds. They saw neither the water of the lake nor the sky. They yielded suddenly to the pernicious breath of the past which overthrew pitilessly the fragile structure of their good resolutions. Then Roberts tore himself gently from the embrace. Once more, giving way, she murmured :

"No. . . . No. . . . Again."

"Take care, Alba! If anyone came. . . ."

"We must meet again to-morrow evening . . . just once more, will you? "

She arranged her hair hurriedly, by the distant lights on the terrace. Roberts said :

"Come, quickly. . . . We have stayed here too long."

Alba insisted.

"To-morrow evening, here. . . . At the same time. . . . Promise me."

"Yes."

They left the summer-house and hurried back to the terrace. At the foot of the steps, behind the marble balustrade, Roberts whispered in a low voice :

"We'll separate now. . . . Go up that way. . . . I will go back to the drawing-room by the inner court."

It was too late. A silhouette had appeared at the top of the steps; a man in evening dress, with a cigar in his mouth, was walking up and down. He would have certainly turned if the sight of Roberts and Alba at the foot of the steps had not attracted his attention.

XXI

"HELLO, Freddy!" exclaimed Roberts, who was obliged to come up with Mme. de Nogales, so as not to appear to be running away. "You are taking a little breather, too, old boy?"

In the same light tone, Mme. de Nogales came in with:

"Captain Nicholson, it is really too warm in the dancing-room. . . . I suggested to my partner to take a little fresh air after the fox-trot. . . ."

"You have had plenty of time to enjoy it, madame, because we have just had a series of waltzes and tangoes. . . ."

Roberts hastened to change the conversation.

"Suppose we go and have some iced cup. Come along, you two."

He led them towards the buffet, offered the drinks with unusual eagerness, and called out suddenly, when he caught sight of Major Stead:

"Ah, old boy, we've just been to the edge of the lake and seen a water-snake swimming in the undergrowth. . . ."

And he disappeared with Stead. Nicholson and Mme. de Nogales remained *tête-à-tête*. He, with perfect composure, remarked:

"The opportunities of speaking to you alone are rare, madame."

"All I can say is, my dear captain, that no one here appears to have that desire. What one says at the Maharajah's may be heard by anyone."

"Even your conversations with Roberts? "

"Certainly. . . . Especially those! But tell me, Nicholson, you know your friend better than me. Don't you know that he is a strong character, one of those men who, when once they have locked up their heart with a double turn, would not raise a little finger to look for the key? "

Alba's laugh disconcerted Nicholson. Was she ironical? He made a great effort to joke in return.

"Come, now! I bet my friend has tried to move you by recalling the past."

"In that case, my dear sir, you are quite mistaken. . . ."

Nicholson was not able to hide the gleam of satisfaction which lit up his gloomy face. Then Alba added in her sweetest tone:

"Oh! I won't say that he did not try to. . . . Well, you understand. . . . But men are all alike."

The gleam of satisfaction vanished from Nicholson's blue eyes, and in an undertone begged:

"Listen to me, Alba. I must . . . I must speak to you. . . . Not here, where we may be disturbed at any moment. . . . Will you come with me? . . ."

She interrupted him as she stifled a yawn.

"No. I've got a headache. . . . I am tired after the day's shoot. . . ."

"Then to-morrow? "

"Yes. . . . No. . . . I don't know. . . . Besides, we have nothing to say to each other. . . ."

"Yes we have. . . . I pray you, Alba. It is very important. I want to speak to you. . . . Alba, I beg you."

She assumed a bored expression, held out her hand to say good-bye and ended:

"Perhaps to-morrow evening. . . . Yes . . . I will see. . . . Good night, Nicholson."

"Let me accompany you as far as the hall, at least."

"If you like. . . ."

He went up to her. They had about thirty yards to go before they separated. Slackening his pace he added a few words at the risk of letting loose those that were surging in his heart.

"I want to speak to you to-morrow, Alba. If you knew. . . . When I saw you appear the other evening. . . . Cairo. . . . The beautiful evenings on the Nile. . . . Do you remember?"

Slowly she turned her heavy eyes on him with mocking irony.

"You as well! . . ."

And without giving him time to reply to those three cruel words, she held out her hand:

"Come. . . . Good night. . . . If I am not too tired I will listen to you to-morrow evening."

She vanished. Her graceful silhouette stood out at the end of the gallery. Nicholson, immovable, with a thoughtful brow, gazed for a long time at the door behind which she had disappeared.

Roberts was chatting with Prince de Zorren, Colonel

Ramda Singh, Freeman and Stokes on the terrace when Nicholson returned. Freeman hailed his comrade.

"I say, Freddy, your pal Roberts is in great form! He's been making us laugh with his tale about polo on an elephant's back with the Maharajah of Boothral. . . . I should like to have seen that! They used cocoanuts instead of balls!"

Stokes, the New York banker, knocked the ashes from his cigar.

"Give us another story, major! You're a scream. I'm sorry my wife is dancing instead of listening to you."

But Nicholson's arrival seemed to have damped Roberts' good spirits. He begged to be excused. The group melted away. Nicholson remained alone with his friend. Roberts, ill at ease, said to him:

"Old man, I'm getting tired, I'll say good night and clear off."

Nicholson put his hand on his arm and stopped him.

"Not before we have had a word or two, if you don't mind, Eddie?"

"Certainly. . . . Let's go down into the park."

They walked side by side. Nicholson stopped under a large tree. His face was grave. His blue eyes gazed at Roberts with unspeakable anxiety, which was more disconcerting than any words. Roberts had difficulty in meeting their strange look. They seemed to search his innermost thoughts, to fathom his most secret intentions.

He mastered this disturbing impression, and asked in the most natural manner that he could assume:

"Well, Freddy, what is it all about?"

"I want to ask you a favour."

"A favour! . . . That's a funny way to talk between

you and me. . . . You are very careful how you speak! You are making rather a fuss. Come out with it, whatever you have in your mind. You know quite well that you could ask me a thousand favours! And I should say a thousand times, 'Yes.' "

"Very well. . . . I don't want there to be any mystery between us. You follow me, old man? We two must not pretend to be friends, and under a semblance of friendship do shabby little tricks on the sly. . . . No! none of that. . . . I am very upset here, owing to Mme. de Nogales. Yes, I admit it. . . . And I'm getting worse. My mad love for this woman is getting the better of me, and every time I see her with this monkey I lose my reason. . . . I can't think clearly. . . . In fact I don't know what I'm doing."

"Poor old Freddy! "

"Yes . . . I am a poor creature . . . a fanatic, and no one suspects my real character. I try to hide it under that outward indifference that our training teaches us, when we are not born with that sang-froid which astonishes people on the Continent and is a favourite subject with their caricaturists. Although at night I suffer, like a disappointed lover. You should have let me go the day before yesterday. The damage is done. So much the worse. . . . But, at any rate, put a limit to it. . . . Let me suffer simply on account of her, and do not add to it the torture I should go through if you really were to amuse yourself by . . ."

"By what? "

"By taking this woman on again, for instance."

"You are joking. Haven't I told you a dozen times that she is less than nothing to me? "

"I know! I know! But it would be so much better if you were to promise me one thing: never to speak to her again. . . . Listen, let us both go away; of course in a perfectly polite manner. . . . You understand what I mean? I'll also give up any idea of seeing her again privately."

"Oh! What trouble you are looking for! Is it necessary to make a formal promise over such a trivial thing? "

"Excuse me! It is anything but trivial. . . . Our friendship is at stake. . . . I beg you, Eddie, don't risk ruining this friendship that we sealed with our blood, over there, under the fire of the Afridis. . . . Eddie, do you remember when my hand sought yours, to grasp it, when we were side by side, half conscious, wounded, smothered with dust; two human wrecks, who had only one wish: to wipe out the past and become reconciled out of sheer gratitude. . . . Well, the same hand, that of the man who owes his life to you, holds it out to you to-day, to ask you to do this for him."

Roberts, carried away by Nicholson's enthusiasm, did not hesitate a second. He seized his hand, grasped it tightly and replied:

"I promise you solemnly, my dear Freddy. . . . What more can I do to put your mind at rest? "

"Keep your promise, that's all. . . ."

Roberts was sitting in his bungalow, looking out of the window, gazing at the stars. He held in his hand the crumpled lace handkerchief that Alba had given him when she looked at herself in her mirror to put her hair tidy after their first kiss. He had forgotten the handkerchief

in his pocket. And now, shutting his eyes, he inhaled the scent of this pale pink morsel that not long ago Alba had twisted in her fingers. As the perfume intoxicated him it gradually overpowered his will.

Then he gave a start. He put the handkerchief on the table close by and tapped with his knuckles on the arm of the chair. He must rouse his conscience, chase away these bad dreams, try to realize things and fight against the malicious suggestions of the Devil.

Deliberately he got up. His resolution was irrevocable. To-morrow evening, contrary to the promise that Alba had forced from him, he would not meet her by the lake.

XXII

THE next evening, after a dinner-party of fifty guests, among whom were some new arrivals from Delhi, they danced in the drawing-rooms at Gizager. At the first strains of the jazz band Roberts took Nicholson aside :

" Well, old man. . . . You are no longer annoyed with me, I hope? "

" I have never been annoyed, you know that quite well! "

" You can rest assured that I have spent the whole day with Stead and Burgess out shooting."

" Do you think I doubt your word? . . . "

" Come, Freddy. . . . Your trouble upsets me. . . . Ah! if I know you as I think I do. . . . You are still hiding up this sorrow that's getting you."

" What does it matter, Eddie. . . . Let's laugh it off. . . . You once said to me: ' One must take it all in a devil-me-care spirit.' . . . And I mean to do so. . . . "

" It is pretty hard, old boy. . . . "

" No. No! Not it. I will do as you do. . . . Look on the merry side of life! "

Nicholson's distressed smile touched Roberts. He read his thoughts. Did he realize the depths of his despair? The terrible anguish which tortured his too sensitive

mind? In the afternoon Nicholson had chatted gaily with Mlle. de Cassano. During dinner he had talked with the Marquise de Pazanne. However, when he listened to his charming neighbour he hardly heard her. When he laughed at a witty remark it was a mechanical laugh. His glances kept wandering towards Alba. Her presence was a secret torture to him, which he had to bear stoically. What were the physical sufferings he had endured over yonder, when he was near death, wounded on those rocky mountains, compared with the mental suffering that Alba inflicted on him with perfect indifference? Poor romantic Nicholson's hopeless love broke his heart, forced him, with an outward appearance of calm, to hide the poignant grief of unrequited affection.

Roberts took him to the buffet with Freeman and made him take a glass of vodka.

"Here, old man, drink some Muscovite Ambrosia. . . . That will console you for having missed that black buck at thirty yards! Then dance with Mrs. Stokes, who is the best fox-trotter in all India!"

When Nicholson left the American bar, Freeman remarked:

"Freddy doesn't seem up to the mark this evening. . . . What's the matter?"

"Nothing serious. . . . I think he's had a letter from London that has upset him. . . . Get him to have a few drinks this evening, that'll do the trick."

"You are right, major; we'll cheer him up."

Roberts went into another room. He had a word with Prince de Zorren and the Maharajah. Then he danced with the wife of the Governor of Madraipur. About a quarter to eleven he was just crossing the entrance hall of

the large drawing-room, when Alba beckoned him with a look. He hesitated several seconds. Then he went up to her. Their conversation between the screen and green shelter of some dwarf palms, was brief. Alba asked him with a pretty smile :

“ At what time am I to meet you by the lake? ”

“ I am not going there this evening.”

The abruptness of his reply startled her.

She insisted :

“ You are not going there? . . . You promised me yesterday evening. . . .”

“ That’s true. . . . But believe me, Alba, it is better that we do not meet there. . . .”

“ Are you sure? ”

“ Yes. . . . We said all we had to say yesterday evening.”

Alba gazed at him with a little pout of reproach :

“ We have said all that we have to say? Then I will not insist any further. . . . Good night.”

She moved away, then, turning round, she gave a little ironical look and repeated :

“ Good evening! ”

Roberts was disconcerted by her attitude. He was about to go after her and stop her and make excuses for his brutality when the Marquise de Pazanne came to ask him to dance. He hesitated in the hall. He had a feeling of satisfaction, tinged with regret.

The fête continued. The pink Maraschino sorbets in crystal saucers radiated their rainbow colours. Nicholson with Stead, Freeman and Young drank champagne. Roberts was hastening to join them when he noticed that

his cigarette-case was empty. And as he did not care for the scented cigarettes that the Maharajah provided that evening, together with cigars eight inches long, he went back to his bungalow in order to replenish his supply.

He crossed the park and passed by the summer-house at the side of the lake. The recollection of the *tête-à-tête* with Alba, the preceding night, suddenly seized him. But he quickly drove away these dangerous reminiscences. He quickened his pace, his serene expression indicated his inward satisfaction. He had cut short the disturbing recollections of the past. It was better so. Very frankly he had to admit to himself that his attitude towards Alba had cost him an effort. But the welfare of his friend was well worth the sacrifice. In a short time, all that would be forgotten. Alba would disappear again, and live her life under other skies. Fate would lead her far away, with Prince de Zorren. After this hectic meeting, peace would reign in the hearts of the two officers as they travelled back to Europe, and nothing would disturb the course of their warm friendship.

Roberts turned the handle of the glass door which led to the sitting-room of his bungalow. He cautiously searched for the electric switch on the left and stood amazed in the doorway. Alba was there, sitting in an armchair, with a cigarette in her hand.

For half an hour Alba had waited for him. In spite of the major's formal resolve and his refusal to speak to her *tête-à-tête* she had not felt herself beaten. Without any light she had sat waiting for Roberts' return, like a panther on the watch, spying for the lone traveller in the forest.

Since her arrival at Gizager she had settled her plan and had held to it with tenacity, and nothing could move her from it. She had summed up the situation. Roberts, the elder, more experienced than Nicholson, seemed glad merely to see her again. While the other, with the ardour of youth, was overpowered by his love. Roberts was guided by reason—Nicholson, mastered by the revival of his passion, was ready to commit any folly to re-conquer her whom he had loved, not long ago. The only way of breaking their friendship was to recapture, or at any rate to try and win, Roberts back. In doing that she was sure to deal the other a deadly blow.

While she smoked her cigarettes, alone in this silent bungalow, she anticipated her revenge with grim satisfaction. Her wounded womanly pride was salved when she pictured, in her mind, the comedy that she was going to play. The very depth of her femininity was appeased with this secret joy. . . . Roberts was very strong! . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . But how long could he resist the poison of her charm. . . . Her soft voice. . . . Her seductive words. . . . She knew how to punish these two strong men who pretended that they had shaken off all thoughts of her! She smiled as she pictured the results of her cruel game. . . . Soon, Nicholson would know all. . . . Jealousy would consume him. . . . Their great friendship, undermined, would collapse by degrees and they would then learn what it means to burn, with offensive words, a woman's photograph.

Roberts looked at her without speaking. She seemed to enjoy his surprise. And smiling more than ever, she said:

"Your astonishment, is it a compliment or a reproach?"

He did not reply. So then she said playfully:

"Anyway, shut the door, Eddie. You are not going to push me out, straight away, *manu militari*, from your room?"

Roberts obeyed and drew the curtain across the window.

"That is a wise precaution, my dear. . . . A belated servant might see us here. . . ."

"Alba! What imprudent behaviour. . . ."

"You forced me to it. . . . You would not meet me *tête-à-tête* by the lake. So, I have come here. When a woman makes up her mind. . . . You are not angry, I hope?"

"No! . . . Angry, what an ideal . . . But have you thought of Prince de Zorren?"

A merry little laugh rang in Roberts' ears.

"The Prince? . . . Pfffttt! . . . That is the least of my troubles. I told you, my dear Eddie, that our relations were purely platonic. The very fact that I come to your rooms at one o'clock in the morning, is that not sufficient?"

"But . . ."

"But, what the Prince may think of me does not interest you in the least. . . . What concerns you, is Nicholson, it is what *he* might imagine, if he knew that we were here *tête-à-tête*."

"Quite true. That is what I tried to make you realize yesterday evening. . . . Ah! my dear Alba, I don't want any misunderstanding between us. . . . Let us try and be frank . . . and make ourselves clear to each other, without reserve. . . . I have explained to you that after that Afghan campaign, Freddy and I became close and

loyal friends. . . . One does not want to ruin, to risk breaking a close friendship which is both sincere and true."

Alba got up. She threw her cigarette-end into a brass bowl filled with petals of flowers, and gazed at Roberts. In her dark pupils, under her long lashes, there was no sign of defiance, of rancour, but a fleeting glance of reproachful sadness:

"Even though one makes a woman suffer?"

These words, murmured without any trace of anger, with resignation, more effective than any reproaches, moved Roberts. In spite of everything he asked himself if he did not exaggerate his scruples, and if the anxiety not to aggravate his friend's distress did not make him unjust to this adorable woman, whom in the past he had loved, but no longer wished to love, summoning all his will-power, using, in an heroic effort, all his courage to honour the promise that he had given.

Alba took him gently by the hand. They sat side by side on the sofa. Alba spoke first:

"Come, listen to me, my dear lover of other days. . . . You said that we ought to explain ourselves without reserve. You are right. . . . I also, I have come to you so that, face to face, hands sweetly joined as now, we may look at things clearly. Eddie, answer me, looking straight in my eyes. . . . Put your heart upon your lips, according to the Oriental formula. . . . Did we love one another? Did we, for six months, play a miserable comedy which is enacted every day in European drawing-rooms? . . . Wait! Let me ask you if ever anything in my attitude has led you to suppose that I loved you for mercenary or unspeakable motives? Were you rich in London? . . .

Could I say to myself at that time: 'I am going to encourage a man in the hope of gaining some material advantages?' "

"Oh! Alba!"

"I don't think you have had anything to reproach me with, except being married to a 'captain of industry,' whose trickery I knew nothing about."

"Poor darling! How could I think anything like that? . . ."

"Well, Fate separated us. I have loyally explained what has happened to me, since. . . . Chance brought me to India. My voyage was enhanced at the thought of finding you alone, of telling you how happy I should be to live over again with you the sweet hours of the past. But instead of finding my lover of yesterday happy to take me in his arms I have encountered an acquaintance, very distant, very cold, determined to forget what has happened and to forswear our happiness. . . ."

Roberts listened without stirring, without daring to look at his neighbour. She took his hand once more, with hesitation, she fondled it for some seconds. Then, taking advantage of Roberts' silence, she murmured:

"Does friendship compel one to be unjust to those who love you?"

Roberts turned his head towards Alba. The dumb agony that he saw on her face tortured him. He seized her wrists and looked at her like a person led astray, who does not know what to believe.

"Unjust . . . me, unjust? . . ."

Alba sighed. She drew herself away and got up.

He called her:

"Where are you going?"

"This strong light hurts my eyes."

She switched off the light. She drew back the curtain. The pale moonlight hardly lit the little room. Alba came up to him:

"Darling, we are two poor creatures and we did wrong, without wanting to. . . . Oh! I read everything that has passed in your mind. I do not blame you for anything. . . . You have always had a loyal heart, Eddie. A great heart. Besides that, a hero, honoured, as you have been, by the highest military distinction that can be gained. You could not have base thoughts. . . . No! Do not protest. . . . I admire you. But you wrong me . . . wrong me terribly. . . ."

Alba's last words stuck in her throat. She sank upon the cushions, her face hidden in her arm. She wept quietly, her beautiful body heaved under her stifled sobs. Roberts knelt by the side of her. He took her in his arms, as he would a child that he wanted to pacify. She let him do so, inert. He kissed her hands, her naked shoulders. She murmured:

"Ah! . . . What misery! What awful misery!"

He guided her through the dimly lighted room, he led her to the window, through which one saw the flower-beds, the trees in the park, and the silver mirror of the peaceful lake. In the silence of the night they could only hear the water of the neighbouring fountain under the spreading acacias, and every now and then the distant melody of the orchestra which was still playing in the palace.

Alba, clinging to Roberts' arm, whispered:

"All the world would be beautiful if you loved me still."

She pointed with her pretty hand towards the window, the florescence of the lake framed by the lace foliage hanging from the branches of the small trees. And her head rested sadly upon Roberts' shoulder. While the fountain marked time with rhythmic beat as it fell into the rose-tinted basin.

Suddenly, in a frantic burst of passion, Roberts embraced her.

"You know quite well that I love you still. . . . That I have always loved you."

"No. . . . No. . . . You say that for pity. . . . You see me suffer, so you . . ."

She did not complete the sentence. Their kiss united their troubled hearts.

"I still love you."

"Ah! if it were only true. . . ."

"Don't you see that I am mad, that I am afraid of myself . . . and that I struggle against it, hopelessly."

"Do you long for me as you used to do? Would you like to live again, in my arms, those divine moments of our *tête-à-tête* on the Riviera? I can't believe yet that you are here, near me, as you used to be, when we had but one thought—to love—and when the days that we did not see one another, were so long and so dull. . . ."

"Ah! darling . . . those recollections, I have conjured them up every evening during my exile. They haunted me at night when I was alone in the fort on the frontier, you kept me company, you appeared to me, you spoke to me. . . . I whispered your name. . . . I felt that I touched your skin as I do to-night . . . that I inhaled your perfume . . . that I clasped you. . . ."

Alba's arms crept round Roberts' neck. Her body

pressed against his. Her mouth covered his face with kisses.

"Then you want me again, my love? . . . I have not entirely lost you? . . ."

"You have never lost me. . . . Ah, if I could. . . ."

Alba divined Roberts' thought. She put her hand upon his lips.

"Say no more, love of my life. . . . The whole world does not exist for us. . . . We are lost in this seclusion, regardless of all else. . . . Two derelicts who love one another and who stretch their arms despairingly towards each other . . . what matters the rest of the world. . . ."

She went to the door and pushed the bolt. She came back to Roberts and pointed to the other door near the sofa. She asked him very softly:

"Where does that lead to?"

"My room."

"I am going to hide there, darling. . . . In a few minutes I will call you."

She kissed him once more, her lips clung passionately to his, with the fervour of an impatient animal, and she disappeared.

Roberts remained alone in the dimly-lighted room. His fixed gaze saw neither the sofa on which they had embraced, nor the peaceful beauty of the sleeping park—an unreal landscape framed by the window; nor the bowl of faded flowers where the cigarettes, reddened by Alba's lips, were breathing their last, in a curl of blue smoke. He saw nothing because the intoxication of his conscience blurred the realities. Alba's last words still rang in his ears:

“ In a few minutes I will call you! ”

The freshness of her mouth still clung to his lips.

He had a momentary vision of the future, as if one were projecting at mad speed a film of coming events. Alba and he became lovers once more. Their liaison would be known to-morrow, the day after, in a few days. . . . Nicholson would learn the truth. . . . Then the picture became hazy and Roberts felt as though his heart was held in a vice. He turned his head towards the door that Alba had shut. His eyes haggard, sweat on his brow. He thought he saw Nicholson, just as he picked him up that night on the Cow's Head; a thin stream of blood from his lips, his face pale, covered with dust; Nicholson, who stretched out to him his two arms in mute supplication. . . . He put his hand to his forehead, like a man suffering from delusions, for he heard a distant call, or at least he thought he heard words which tore at his conscience: “ No! . . . No! . . . Do not do that, Eddie. . . . You have saved my life, do not break my heart . . . I entreat you! You are more to me than a brother! Me, I am a poor fellow who loves and who suffers. . . . Leave her to me, for pity's sake! . . . ”

Then, like a trapped animal, like a being seized with intense fear, Roberts opened a wardrobe which contained a travelling suit. He tore off his white tie. He took off his patent leather shoes. . . . He had only one desire; to get away at once; to jump into one of the Maharajah's cars and go back to Bangamer, and take the morning train, which, in two days, would reach Bombay. He would go aboard the boat whatever happened, even if he had to sleep on deck. In order to act more quickly he switched on the light and drew the curtain. He was changing his

clothes when laughter and voices came from the park. Men's voices, merry voices, came nearer. He listened anxiously. Footsteps crunched on the gravel. A handful of sand rattled against the glass of his window. Stead's voice rang out in the night:

"Hallo, Roberts! . . . One last glass of bubbly? . . ."

Another voice exclaimed:

"Open the door, damn it."

"Gone to bed already, Roberts? "

He looked for a dressing-gown, put it on hurriedly and opened the door. Major Stead, Captains Burgess, Young and Freeman came in; a merry party, each carrying a glass with a bottle under his arm. Roberts was about to shut the door when Nicholson arrived. He was waving a flask of whisky and whistling an Hawaian tune. He stopped in the doorway of the bungalow, smiled pleasantly at Roberts, and, with a friendly tap on the shoulder, called out:

"Hallo, you old bandit! It looks as though you slink away on the quiet to drink your last whisky alone."

XXIII

THE five unexpected visitors installed themselves without ceremony in the little sitting-room of the bungalow. Stead and Burgess on the sofa. Freeman sitting astride a chair playing with the gold paper from his bottle of champagne. Young had put some glasses at the corner of the table, and with a spill, made of paper, imitated the notes of the litrophone on the six champagne glasses.

They are all very merry, without being tight. Nicholson, alone, has drunk a little more than his companions. Freeman passes on the news.

"Nicholson has had bad news from London. We must cheer him up, poor chap."

They have cheered him up at the buffet with sherry cobbler alternated with gin fizz. Then, when the Marquise de Pazanne and Mlle. de Cassano retired, Burgess suggested :

"Boys, the fête is on the wane. . . . Let's go and serenade Roberts, who's gone to bed. The Mumm toppers squad, form fours. . . . March."

Roberts, having hurriedly hidden his travelling clothes, handed round cigarettes. He concealed his anxiety under cordiality, in keeping with the merriment of his friends.

"Well, Burgess, are they still dancing over there? "

" Yes. Or rather they are chatting on the terrace and listening to the band. The pretty women vanished one by one. . . . Mme. de Nogales, the Marquise, the Italian lady also. . . ."

" You're tired, Roberts? "

" I've been five or six miles in the scorching sun this afternoon. . . . I retired discreetly, but I'm delighted to take a night-cap with you."

" Look at Freddy! He has fallen for Mrs. Stokes. . . ."

Nicholson laughed loudly.

" When I'm broke I shall join the ranks of professional dancers. . . . Twenty dollars a day with coffee thrown in."

" Also a pearl in your shirt front."

" Also madame's pearls."

" Also the favours of the client at four in the morning in a quiet little flat along with all the fun of the fair."

" Also a divorce in the husband's favour."

" Also a front page scandal in the *New York Journal*."

" There's a busy three months for you. Anyway, it's more amusing than drilling a platoon of Sikhs on the parade ground at Lahore. . . . Another drop of Mumm, Freddy! "

Freeman offered another glass to Nicholson, who emptied it in one draught as he hummed the first words of the " Merry Widow ":

" Love's bewitching hour
Holds us in its power.
Gentle . . ."

Suddenly he stops, hands another glass to Roberts, and calls out:

" Let's drink to the *Bruderschaft* German fashion, like the students at Heidelberg, old boy! . . . Pity that ' thou ' is not used in English. But when we are both in Europe I'll *tutoyer* you in France, and I'll say *du* to you in Berlin! "

The others applauded the short ceremony of two arms entwined and glasses emptied at the same time. Nicholson was certainly not worrying about the past, for his good spirits increased. He began to step-dance, taking Roberts by the waist and forcing him to do a burlesque dance to the accompaniment of their friends who whistled a Charleston. Freeman, playing the drum with two sticks on a brass tray, remarked :

" They are splendid, those two. They keep perfect step! "

Suddenly Burgess, who was sitting in an armchair and wanted a match, discovered the ends of cigarettes which bore traces of lip rouge. He exclaimed, mimicking a conspirator in light opera :- " Ho! ho! . . . Mystery and discretion. . . . I've made sensational discoveries in your rooms, Roberts. . . . "

Roberts spotted the cigarette-end in his hand. He rushed over to his friend, made away with the incriminating object and with a knowing wink he murmured :

" Cut it out, Burgess. . . . Not a word! "

The captain understood. He did not follow it up. But when the others came up to know what was the cause of the excitement, Burgess replied :

" I have just found on this brass tray a white jade ball in which a clairvoyant in Bond Street would read the future of the British Empire."

The jade ball glistened in the captain's fingers, as he

showed it to his friends. Roberts, with a nod of the head, thanked Burgess for his tact. Freeman fondled the piece of polished stone.

"A good cricket ball, by Jove!"

Young remarked:

"Hamlet would have foretold his future, if he'd picked that up instead of Yorick's skull."

Nicholson, leaning back in an armchair, called out:

"Don't talk to me about clairvoyants! An old Levantine in the fishmarket in Cairo predicted that I should suffer not from the contents of the bottle, but by the bottle itself. That's silly. . . . I couldn't make it out. . . ."

"It's quite clear, old man. . . . You'll end up by eating broken glass on the music-halls."

Thereupon Freeman began his carillon again on the half empty glasses. While Burgess got up and asked, as he pointed to the door of the room:

"Where does that lead to, Roberts?"

Roberts replied after a slight hesitation:

"To the bathroom."

"Capital. These bottles are a bit lukewarm. I'll go and put them in the cold water for ten minutes."

He went towards the door. Roberts cut him off and stood with his hand on the handle.

"No. . . . There is no water there."

Burgess laughed.

"No water in the bathroom! . . . Humbug!"

"I promise you. . . . Don't go in. . . ."

Roberts' voice became serious. His solemn expression amused Burgess, who, calling to the others as witnesses, put his fingers to his lips:

"Say, there. . . . Hush! . . . Not a word to the Maharajah. . . . Roberts has a corpse behind that door. . . . He won't let anyone go in."

Burgess's pantomime, as he drew back on tip-toe, led Freeman on. He performed a slow tom-tom on a flower-pot and hummed the "Death of Ase."

"Now, gentlemen. . . . In chorus: The funeral march of the *bayadère* strangled by Sultan Roberts, the terror of the houris of Zanzibar! I'll lead in the mourners. . . . You take in the stove to fry the bacon. Nicholson, open the door and let the family come in."

Roberts turned pale suddenly at the danger. He still pretended to joke, and standing before the door, he tried to distract their attention.

"Very funny, Freeman, the body of the dead *bayadère*. . . . Unfortunately she is no longer there. . . . I have taken her to the little temple of Siva. . . . Come along here."

But the diversion that Roberts attempted stimulated the others. They enjoyed teasing their friend. Nicholson first, with the obstinacy of a man who is no longer very sure of himself, insisted:

"Let us in, old man. . . . Why yes . . . we'll have a laugh. . . ."

"No."

Burgess went one better:

"What then! . . . You haven't got the treasures of Nizam in your bathroom."

Burgess alone began to realize that his friend had a good reason for stopping them from going in. He remembered the cigarette with the red lip-salve on it. He

saw Roberts' look of anxiety, which no one but he could suspect. Then he tried to come to his help.

"Come, the joke isn't funny. . . . It's very stifling with cigarette smoke here. Let's take a turn by the side of the lake."

Burgess's remark falls flat. Freeman insists on burying his *bayadère*. Nicholson has now become obsessed by the idea of opening the door. Even Young does not understand Roberts' obstinacy. A bachelor in a bungalow in India has nothing to hide, above all to his friends. What's the meaning of ridiculously guarding this closed door! Young is a great Rugby player, but he understands nothing of the delicacies of social diplomacy. In fact he sets the powder alight. He takes Freeman and Nicholson by the arm and, winking his eye, as if he were cracking a great joke, he calls out:

"A corpse! . . . You make me laugh. . . . It is a woman hidden in there! "

Burgess tries to put the hounds off the scent. He is too late. Freeman, who looks upon it as just a joke, nudges Nicholson's elbow:

"Naturally. . . . You did not know that he had a live bird in the bathroom! "

Nobody says anything more. The attitude of Nicholson takes their breath away. His drunken merriment suddenly vanished from his face. The remarks of Young and Freeman seem to have sobered him instantly. His expression becomes hard. He steps back to look Roberts up and down, before the door. He breathes heavily. He asks in a solemn voice:

"Is it true that you don't want to open the door because there is a woman there? "

Roberts still tries to pass it off as a joke :

" You take these jokes seriously. . . . You are a fool, Freddy."

In the same serious tone he repeats :

" Is there a woman there? . . ."

" No."

" Then open it."

" No."

Nicholson raises his voice :

" I know who is there."

" You are mistaken."

" Then open it."

" No."

Nicholson throws himself at the handle of the door. Roberts seizes him by the arm and stops him :

" These are my rooms."

" I don't care. . . . Open it. . . . I know she is there. . . . Open it. If you don't . . ."

Nicholson's threat dies on his lips. The door swings open. With the darkness of the room behind her, Alba appears. At the sight of this vision Nicholson becomes deadly white. He stepped farther back. Then suddenly, before Freeman and Young have time to stop him, he has picked up an empty bottle and hit Roberts a terrible blow on the forehead. Roberts does nothing to defend himself. The bottle falls in fragments. Blood flows down the face of the officer, while Stead and Burgess seize hold of Nicholson who, trembling from head to foot, falls into an armchair. Alba, with Freeman and Young, rush up to Roberts. Making a supreme effort of will, half stunned, he remains standing. He does not notice his wound. He does not feel it. He felt most, for the

suffering of his friend. The blood stained his dressing-gown. Alba, with a towel and some water, helped by Young and Freeman, washes his face. She looks inquiringly at Freeman. She is alarmed at the seriousness of the wound. But Freeman reassures her, pointing to the spot:

“It is only a scratch. . . . Look. . . . The bone is not touched. . . . Nothing serious, thank God!”

Roberts let them do it without saying a word. He is not conscious of what is taking place around him. Lights dance before his eyes. Freeman brings some fresh water and says to Alba, who continues her attentions and has just taken a piece of glass out of the wound:

“In a minute we’ll take him to the English doctor at the hospital at Bangamer. With half a dozen stitches he will be all right in a few days.”

Reassured, Alba gets up and says to Freeman:

“Bandage his forehead with some clean linen. I’ll go and tell my chauffeur at once.”

She goes up to Nicholson, who sits all of a heap in the armchair, his head between his hands, sobbing like a child. She lifts up his head with incredible violence and shouts at him:

“Coward. . . . You are a coward. But I haven’t finished with you, we’ve still got an account to settle, you and I.”

Stead and Burgess, who hear Alba’s threat, look at one another disconcerted. They want to intervene. But it is too late. Alba has gone out of the bungalow.

XXIV

THE witnesses and the actors in the drama that had just been played remained silent after Alba went out.

Nicholson, overwhelmed, driven to despair by his act, remained prostrate in the armchair. Roberts, his forehead bandaged by a towel, looked at the basin of reddened water and the bits of glass scattered over the carpet. He was quite alert and did not trouble about his wound. He had seen worse on the North-West Frontier.

The other officers were solemnly silent, for they foresaw the serious results of this affair. Major Stead, the senior officer, was the first to speak :

"You fellows, Nicholson's action is very regrettable. He will be severely punished by military law. . . . You know, as well as I do, to what punishment a man is liable who strikes his superior officer. . . . Luckily our friend Roberts is not seriously hurt. . . . But blood has been spilt. . . ."

Roberts made a gesture of protest :

"Oh! . . . It's nothing. . . . Besides, Freddy was tight. . . ."

"No doubt about it. . . ."

"You see that I am quite all right. . . . In forty-eight hours I shall be stitched up . . . so let's say no more about it."

Burgess interjected :

"Certainly, Roberts . . . we all appreciate your generosity towards your friend who has acted in a moment of madness. . . . Isn't that so, Nicholson, you are sorry? . . ."

Nicholson made a gesture showing extreme sorrow, which emphasized his depression.

Burgess went on :

"But I think I understand Stead's idea. In two or three days people will be chattering, stories will get about . . . everybody will be spreading details of the quarrel. So I think it would be wise, before we leave here, to agree together what to say and what not to say, don't you think so, Stead? "

"That's exactly my idea. . . . In the interest of our friends, we must arrange, in case of need, to give a watered down version of what happened this evening. First we will agree formally not to speak to anybody about the whole business."

Freeman and Young agreed immediately.

Stead replied :

"But we must be prepared for whatever happens. . . . Suppose, for some reason or another, the authorities get wind of the affair. . . ."

"That's not very likely."

"One never knows. . . . Suppose they ordered an inquiry. We should have to give evidence. We ought all to tell the same tale."

Freeman exclaimed :

"The best way out of the difficulty is to say that it was an accident. . . ."

"And all offer different explanations; that would give

it away, first go. . . . We must agree as to the cause of the accident."

"That's quite simple," said Burgess. "We were all six together in Roberts' rooms."

"What doing? "

"Why, drinking the last *chota peg* before going to bed. That's only natural. . . ."

"And then."

"Roberts said to us: 'Let me offer you a little glass of brandy.' He got up and went towards the wardrobe with the mirror to get the bottle. He fell against it and hit his head against the glass, which broke and caused the wound. . . . What do you think of that? "

"That seems both simple and logical."

"It's the best explanation."

"Is that your opinion, Roberts? "

"Yes."

"What do you say, major? "

Major Stead also approved:

"That's very good. Only the mirror in the wardrobe is not broken."

"Just so. . . . But I'll soon fix that up."

Freeman took the jade ball and with one bang smashed the glass, which fell in bits on the bottom of the wardrobe floor.

"That's all in order now, isn't it? "

"Absolutely. . . . So now, you fellows, it is quite understood, isn't it? . . . Roberts wanted to offer us . . ."

Young interrupted him:

"Hush! . . . I can hear footsteps in the avenue."

The officers listened. They detected voices.

Freeman whispered :

" They're coming to fetch Roberts to take him by car to Bangamer. All the better ! "

The door of the bungalow opened. Alba reappeared. But she was not alone. General Sir Ronald Armstrong and the Marquis de Pazanne followed her into the room.

The arrival of the general caused profound astonishment. Roberts' friends, all standing perfectly still, looked with ill-concealed anxiety at Sir Ronald Armstrong, who, with Alba at his side, was gazing at the bandaged forehead of the wounded officer. The disorder in the room, the basin full of reddened water, the strange attitude of the six silent men, surprised him. He turned to Alba and in icy tones he said :

" I see, madame, that something out of the ordinary has been happening here, but . . . "

Alba interrupted him :

" Then, general, if you are sure that I do not bother you, I should be glad if you would inquire of these gentlemen, the facts as to what took place here a few minutes ago. . . . That is all I ask. Major Roberts is wounded. . . . You will doubtless be anxious to know why he is wounded."

The general turned to Stead :

" Will you explain, major ? "

" Certainly, general. . . . As a matter of fact, nothing very extraordinary has happened here. . . . My friends and I, not long ago, left the terrace in front of the palace and strolled into the park. We saw a light in Roberts' window, so we thought we would come and have our last whisky and soda of the evening with him. We came

in. Roberts was alone in the room. . . . We chatted, smoked cigarettes, drank a little champagne. Roberts offered us some old brandy. With this idea, he wanted to open that wardrobe with a glass door that you see here. . . . He caught his foot against this armchair. In falling, his forehead hit the glass, which broke. . . . Naturally Roberts' head got cut, but fortunately it is not very serious . . . and that is the accident that Mme. de Nogales has thought it her duty to report to you."

The general gave a questioning look towards the other officers, who confirmed Stead's story.

"That's exactly what happened, general. . . ."

"Roberts was hurt there. . . ."

"He wanted to get something from the wardrobe."

The general turned to Alba :

"Ah well, madame, are you satisfied? "

"No, general. . . . I notice that Major Roberts, the victim of the accident, has not, himself, confirmed the explanations of these gentlemen. . . . Will you ask him also, if that is the exact truth? "

Roberts did not wait for the question. He replied simply :

"It is perfectly true, general."

Then Alba, who looked at him with a strange fixed stare and seemed to wait for his reply before she decided upon her course of action, awoke with a start, as from a stupor. Her two hands gripped the back of the armchair in front of her, she stared at Sir Ronald Armstrong with a steady sidelong glance, lifted her head, and with a clear voice which rang like a sentence, declared :

"Ah well, general, I regret to tell you that these gentlemen lie. . . ."

"Madame!"

"I repeat it. . . . These gentlemen lie. . . . Do I express myself clearly enough?"

"Madame. . . . You do not realize the gravity of what you are saying. . . ."

"I am quite well aware that I accuse them of having agreed to tell a pack of lies. . . . I accuse them, in front of you and the Marquis de Pazanne, whom I asked to accompany us, as a man of honour, an impartial witness, so that he may help us in our discussion. . . . I think that giving false evidence is a crime, according to your code of honour."

"Madame, you cannot leave it at that. . . . You must justify your insinuations. . . . I insist."

"And I, I ask nothing better. . . . The story that Major Stead, backed up by his friends, has told you is a tissue of lies. . . . Major Roberts has been a victim of Captain Nicholson here, who attacked him with an empty bottle in his hand and wounded him."

Stead interrupted:

"General, don't believe it. . . . Pardon Mme. de Nogales, whose imagination suggests that it is a matter of blows when it is nothing more than an accident. . . ."

Alba trembled, as though Stead's words had lashed her full in the face. She walked into the middle of the room.

"General, these gentlemen have invented the breaking of the glass in the wardrobe to hide the facts from you, and to shield the guilty party. But I myself saw Captain Nicholson strike his superior officer. . . . Further, I am able to substantiate my statement with material proof. . . . I have myself dressed Major Roberts' wound. . . . See, general, I have washed it with this water red with

blood, in that bowl. I have also taken out a piece of glass from the bottle which lies broken here. . . . The fragments are still on the carpet. . . .”

Alba bent over the towel stained with red patches; she pointed out to the general and the Marquis de Pazanne a piece of green glass.

“This is what was in the cut on his forehead. . . . Compare that with the white glass of the wardrobe. . . . Is that clear enough?”

The general was astonished. He hesitated, then he inquired:

“But, madame, why were you there?”

“Because, some time ago, Major Roberts and I were friends. . . . My being here, near him, has excited Captain Nicholson’s jealousy. . . . And in this case . . . I say it with regret, general, these officers wearing His Majesty’s uniform have agreed together to hide the serious side of the affair. . . . They have given, of an incident in which I have been concerned, an entirely false version. . . . If you decide that one can juggle with the truth with impunity and lie in order to shield a guilty comrade from a court martial, if you use your authority to cover up an affair like that, I promise you that to-morrow public opinion, through the press, will hear of this scandal.”

“Madame, you have no need to tell me my duty. . . .”

“I beg your pardon, general. . . .”

About to speak, Nicholson turned quickly to Sir Ronald Armstrong, who exclaimed sharply:

“Well . . . what is it?”

Then, pulling himself together and looking his superior officer full in the face, Nicholson spoke:

“Mme. de Nogales is right. It was I who, in a fit

of rage, wounded Major Roberts. That is all I have to say."

There was a prostrated silence. The witnesses of this painful scene looked at Nicholson, who stood still, like a guilty man awaiting sentence. The general seemed to be the most affected by the abrupt admission. He did not want to believe it. He wanted to believe it untrue, up to the end. Now, he was regretfully forced to accept the evidence. He pulled himself up to his full height, and assuming his usual cool manner, he commanded:

"Captain Nicholson, you are under arrest."

"Yes, sir."

"Major Stead, will you escort Captain Nicholson to his room, where he will remain until further orders."

"Yes, sir."

As the two officers walked towards the door Alba, with a movement of the hand, stopped them. Speaking to Sir Ronald, she asked:

"May I have a word with the officer under arrest?"

"No, madame."

"Not even in public?"

"Why? If you have anything to say, madame, say it at once. . . ."

Then Alba turned towards Nicholson and added simply:

"Captain Nicholson, we had a debt to settle, you and I; it is paid."

Roberts was leaving the surgery at Bangamer; the doctor had quickly sewn up his wound. Freeman had accompanied him.

"Was it painful?"

Roberts made an evasive gesture.

"Not very pleasant, this pricking into your live skin. But it is child's play compared with what the Chinese do. . . . No, my dear chap, it's not the body that really suffers, it's the mind."

"Poor old Nicholson, alas! . . . He's waiting for his court martial."

"The best he can expect is to be cashiered. . . . I should never have thought that that woman . . ."

"Ah, Freeman! . . ."

Roberts did not complete the sentence. One of the Maharajah's chauffeurs came up the steps of the main door of the hospital. He saluted.

"Major Sahib?"

"What is it?"

"A note for Major Roberts."

"Give it to me."

Roberts recognized the handwriting. He opened the envelope and took out the note. It only contained these lines, written in pencil:

"When two men have loved the same woman, the worst insult they can offer her is to build up their friendship on the ruins of their loves. You have made game of me. I am avenged. Adieu."

EPILOGUE

ONE evening the British Ambassador at Washington was giving a fête in honour of Mr. Sydney Redsmith, an ex-cabinet minister and one of the leaders of the Labour Party. All the Diplomatic Corps was there. The most important ladies of District Columbia were wearing their politest smiles and their largest pearls. American finance was represented, and also the New York four hundred: aristocrats without coronets.

In one of the rooms two men were talking. One of them was giving, with the dignity of a Roman Emperor, unqualified approval of the income tax. It was Mr. Rodney Hill, a cinematograph magnate. The other, tall, slim, his hair beginning to turn grey, unostentatiously wore the Victoria Cross ribbon. It was Colonel Edward Roberts, British Military Attaché.

"My dear colonel," said Mr. Rodney Hill, "I am very pleased to have met you this evening, and I am going to take the liberty of asking you a small favour."

"At your service, Mr. Hill."

"This is what it is. . . . The Hill Corporation, of which I am the president, is going to produce a sensational film, which takes place in India. Well, if I am not mistaken, colonel, you formerly served in the Anglo-Indian army."

"Yes, I left India six years ago, and I spent more than

ten years of my military career between the Indus and the Brahmapoutra."

"Very good. . . . You are, consequently, the very person to give us some good advice. Would you be so good as to help us with a special scene, in which our producer will try to give a picture of a fête at an imaginary Maharajah's palace? "

"A picture taken in India? "

"No, of course not. To give the public an exact idea of India, it is not necessary to go there; we shall shoot that just outside Washington, at our studios on Fourth Avenue. Our producer is very well up as regards the costumes, the head-dresses, the types, the rites and ceremonies. . . . But I should like a man who knows the country as well as you do, in case of need, to call attention to any possible errors. So, if it would not be asking too much, may I come and fetch you next Friday in my car? "

"With pleasure. It will remind me of my early days in the army."

"I don't think you will be so terribly bored. I have got some elephants from Barnum's. . . . You will meet our star, Marquita Floria, an adorable creature, fit to eat on toast with a little red pepper. . . . Not to mention a battalion of girls, picked by my manager, who is an expert on feminine charms."

"Ah, he is an artist? "

"No. . . . He used to be the stage carpenter with the Bloomfield Follies in New York. A very intelligent boy, as you will see. So, colonel, I can count on you for Friday."

"Certainly."

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The immense studio was flooded with light. The cardboard palace of the Maharajah shone under the projection, while the heteroclit crowd of supers and coloured men in Bengalic, Punjabi, Pathan, Dravidian, Madrian costumes swarmed among the tropical flowers, the buffaloes and the elephants.

Roberts had discovered many mistakes that he had kindly pointed out to the producer:

"The Pathans and Moslem, Mr. Dodds. . . . They should not make obeisance to your papier mâché Siva. I notice also that you have half a dozen good fellows supposed to represent Sikhs, who are shaved as clean as a New York salesman. . . . A Sikh does not cut his hair or his beard. They even have chignons under their turbans. . . . Your Maharanee ought not to expose her face and smile to the crowd like a strolling player. . . . And also your crowd is a mixture of the races of India, who by some extraordinary coincidence have come together in the palace of your potentate. It is just as if in a garden-party at Buckingham Palace you had assembled a collection of Highlanders, Bretons, Tyrolese, Andalusians, Cossacks, Asatians all in national costume! "

Mr. Dodds had taken note of it all. Mr. Hill had admired Roberts' knowledge, then he had taken him aside to say to him:

"You are perfectly right, colonel. But between ourselves the public is quite 'dumb,' and you can show a Jamaican nigger as a rajah on an elephant. . . . What they look at most is the elephant. . . ."

"You don't seem to have a very high opinion of the public, Mr. Hill! "

" Ah, colonel . . . our films are seen by five hundred millions of people. And among them there will be about five hundred who will appreciate the alterations that you have made. . . . But while they are preparing for the great Durban procession, I will hand you over to our second stage-manager, M. Schlesinger. He will introduce you to some of the artistes. So-long, colonel."

Roberts wandered into the false palace. He listened with interest to the stage-manager's explanations. He passed some girls made up as Indian dancing girls and Hindus, who were chewing gum as they waited for their orders. All of a sudden he stopped behind a screen of bamboos and gazed intently at two men in English soldier's uniform, who were discussing the results of a baseball match. At first Roberts thought he had been deceived by the resemblance. His surprise was such that he seized the stage-manager by the arm, and, pointing to the two sappers, asked him in a low voice :

" Do you know who that man is? . . . There . . . in khaki . . . with corporal's stripes."

" Wait. . . . I know most of our supers. . . . You mean that one on the left? "

" Yes."

" His name is Nicholson. . . . Why? Have you noticed a mistake in his uniform? "

Roberts did not reply. He could not take his eyes off Nicholson. Yes. It certainly was he. . . . Older looking, badly shaved, in his ill-fitting corporal's clothes. . . . Nicholson a corporal. Nicholson a super in the Hill Corporation Company!

Roberts turned sharply to the stage-manager and led him to the door leading out of the studio.

" Mr. Schlesinger, would you do me a great service? "

" What is it, colonel? "

" Can you give me the address of that super? "

" Certainly. . . . Come to my office. I'll look up my cards."

The stage-manager sat at his desk. He opened a card index box, which Roberts saw had hundreds of names arranged in alphabetical order and divided under various headings: Niggers. . . . Society people. . . . Athletes. . . . Horsemen. . . . Street Arabs. . . . Old men. . . . Peasants. . . . Chinese. . . . Acrobats. . . . Ecclesiastics. . . .

" Wait a moment . . . Nicholson is not yet classified. . . . My assistant engaged him the other day, because he pretended that he had been an officer in India. But it is all swank, of course. . . . If you only knew what fairy-tales these guys invent to get engaged. . . . This morning, I sent away, with a flea in her ear, a great dark woman who told me she had slept with Lenin, and a poor wretch who swore he was the natural son of William II. . . . Ah! Here is the list of the new-comers. Stay a minute . . . Lopez . . . O'Callaghan . . . Nicholson. He gives his address as 178 Green Street."

Roberts took a note of it.

" How much do you give these poor fellows, Mr. Schlesinger? "

" They get six dollars a day when they work."

" Up to what time do they work to-day? "

" Up to five o'clock! "

" Thank you, Mr. Schlesinger. That's all I want to know."

Roberts got out of his car at the corner of Green Street.

It was six o'clock in the evening. He walked down the narrow thoroughfare. It was a street of humble houses. The shopkeepers exhibited bargains and cheap goods. Workmen's lodgings alternated with lodging-houses. Fruiters with tailors and bootmakers.

Roberts stopped in front of No. 178. A drab-looking four-story house with a flight of several steps, and a card : "*Furnished Rooms to Let.*" He went into the passage and inquired of a man in shirt-sleeves, who was mending the bottom of a trunk :

"Do you know a Mr. Nicholson here? "

"Nicholson? . . . Which Nicholson? "

"A cinema actor."

"Oh, yes. . . . A guy who works at the studios on Fourth Avenue. You'll find him on the third floor. Room 14."

"Thank you."

Roberts mounted to the third floor, his heart beating. He knocked at the door, a voice answered :

"Come in."

Nicholson was there in slippers and a grey sweater, his hair untidy. He was seated at a little table reading. He evidently thought it was his landlady, making her usual call, because he went on reading until he had finished the paper before he raised his head.

Roberts' voice, however, made him start.

"Freddy! "

He looked at Roberts like a dazed man, who wondered whether he was dreaming or if he was a victim of an illusion.

"It is I, Freddy."

"You! "

He rose, and with a faltering step he came close up and looked at his visitor.

"You, Roberts. . . . What miracle has brought you here? "

"You are not angry with me, Freddy? "

"I, angry? . . . when it was I who . . . Oh! my poor Eddie, if you knew how I have suffered for my terrible behaviour. . . ."

"Enough said, Freddy. . . . Don't let's talk about the past. . . . It is the present only that counts, now that I've found you."

"But what are you doing at Washington? "

"I'm the military attaché. . . ."

Roberts had put his two hands on Nicholson's shoulders. Then, looked at him. He saw, in his tired face, traces of hardships, of moral weariness. His eyes were heavy. He seemed resigned to his lot. Poor Nicholson, formerly so brilliant, so enthusiastic, under his reserved manner. Could it be possible that fate had knocked all the heart out of this young body, that the *joie de vivre* was extinguished in this ardent spirit?

"And you, Freddy, tell me what has happened to you? . . . These six years past, my poor old man. . . . What changes! "

"Ah! Eddie. . . . As I said, I've paid dearly for my folly. . . . You remember, I had brain fever after the scandal. . . . For three months they thought I should lose my reason entirely. And then, in spite of your generous intervention, it meant dismissal. . . . I gave in my papers. You—you were recalled to London where new honours awaited you. . . . You are a colonel, aren't you? That's good, you thoroughly deserve it. . . . As

for me, old man, I went back to civilian life. I thought that, to go abroad was the best way out. So I came steerage, to the United States. . . . Emigrant, my God, yes. . . . With enough money to rebuild my life, in the El Dorado of new men."

"You haven't been able to get a decent billet?"

"I've tried, but I've realized, once more, that soldiers are not good for much when they take off their uniform. . . . I tried all sorts of jobs, without making a fortune in any of them. . . . There are some who are born to become millionaires. I—I have rubbed along, as best I could. . . ."

Whilst Nicholson was talking, Roberts took stock of his modest room. He noticed a what-not behind a curtain which scarcely hid the necks of some bottles. He pointed them out to Nicholson with a questioning look. His friend sighed simply:

"Whisky. . . . Yes. And bad boot-leg stuff at that."

"Oh!"

Then Nicholson leant against the table, put his hand to his forehead and, in a troubled voice, added:

"Yes, Eddie . . . spirits . . . as a vice. . . . No. . . . To forget. . . . You follow me, old chap? If you only knew how remorse can haunt you like a spectre, and come and upbraid you. . . . You think that a decent man does not suffer, when at night, alone, he recalls the past and hears a taunting voice whispering: 'You nearly killed the man who saved your life.'"

"Oh! Freddy. . . . Please, don't. . . ."

"How can one get rid of this terrible reproach when it comes repeatedly knocking at the door of your conscience? . . . I am not altogether a brute, Eddie! . . . I

see two pictures in juxtaposition, in my imagination. . . . You are carrying me on your back at the risk of your life, dragging me from the worst tortures and certain death, and we stretch out our arms and all my heart goes out to you in a deep warm glow of fraternal affection. . . . And then another picture appears. . . . I throw myself upon you, I strike you a violent blow on the head. And you are there before me unmoved, without a word of reproach, the blood pouring from your forehead . . . the blood of my best friend. . . . I am in despair. I clench my fists. I say to myself: 'You have done that. You! And without reason, since you have been deceived by appearances. . . . A very cruel woman has plotted to make you hate your friend, and, stupidly, you have fallen into the trap. . . . Can you understand my despair, my vain regrets, my longing to forget? . . . To forget. . . . Then, spirits at my hand . . . I drink, so that I shouldn't keep brooding. . . . So that I shouldn't see those two delusive pictures. . . . Eddie! I am a great culprit, and my bungled life is my punishment.'

Nicholson's sincere sorrow touched Roberts' heart. He got up and grasped his hand, to try and comfort him with his sympathy. But Nicholson, head down, overcome, murmured:

"You have always been better than I, Eddie! Yes. . . . Yes, an elder brother could not have treated me better. And I have repaid you by trying to murder you. . . . There are some days when I am horrified. . . . Yes, you ought to have left me to die like a dog, over there in the mountains. You risked your life on the Cow's Head to save a wretch who was not worth it. . . . Ah! Old boy, give me your hand once more, as in the old days

in the blockhouse, and leave me to go to the dogs, with a drop of whisky every now and then to drown my sorrow, when I suffer too much."

Tears fell from Nicholson's eyes. His silent grief affected Roberts deeply. He saw the sad melancholy that his unexpected reappearance had caused in his friend's life. Suddenly he put his arm round him. He lifted him up. He looked him in the face, and, as if he wanted to inspire new hope in his overburdened heart, he said:

"No! I won't leave you to go to the dogs, Freddy. . . . Once I rescued you from the Afghan bandits. Now I am going to rescue you from yourself, and drink, which is killing you. You must give up all this remorse business. It's all imaginary, all these tales of the past. . . . I also have a duty to do, not to allow you, any longer, to be afraid of life and the future. . . . You hear, Freddy. . . . *It is I who give orders now.* . . . To begin with, I am a colonel. . . . And I cannot allow an old comrade to join the 'down and outs.' We will face adversity, which takes the liberty of making game of you. . . . Come . . . buck up. . . . It shall not be said that the two cripples of Blockhouse 19, who, together, in the old days, put up a good show against the Moslems' bullets, could not put up a decent fight against the little difficulties of life. . . . Heavens alive, we're not knocked out yet!"

Roberts' kindly authority, his infectious enthusiasm, galvanized Nicholson, whose face lit up, little by little. He seemed to arouse himself from the lethargy which had overwhelmed him. He gazed at his friend, like a patient who had just been saved by his doctor. He stammered out:

"Ah! old boy . . . my dear old . . . I . . . I . . ."

He smiled, he was unable to speak. Then he put his hand upon Roberts' temple with its grey hair, and touching the mark of the wound:

"One can still see it a little. . . . My poor Eddie!"

"Pah! . . . Don't mention that. . . . Whenever a pretty woman asks me where I got this scratch, I always answer: 'Madame, it was an Andalusian lady who threw a flower-pot at me from her balcony. I kept the rose, but I gave her back the pot.'"

"Eddie! Have you really remained my friend?"

"Yes. And I expect I shall remain so for many a day. . . . But enough sentiment, Freddy! We are sympathizing with one another about the past like a couple of very well-behaved schoolgirls. It is all very nice, but I have come about the present, about your business affairs."

"Half a minute. . . . I want to ask you one thing. It will be the only time I shall speak of the past. After that we will never mention it again."

"Go on."

Nicholson hesitated.

"Do you know what has become of Mme. de Nogales?"

"Listen, Freddy, if I should awaken memories, which have lain dormant six years, I think it would be better . . ."

"No, you can speak freely. My mind is made up. I am quite cured. You will see. . . ."

"Very well, I fancy, that famous Justice, of which we speak so often, and which makes herself so rarely felt, if one can judge from the number of rogues upon whom fortune smiles, that famous Justice has overtaken Mme. de

Nogales. Three years ago I happened to be in Paris. I was surprised to find her name mentioned in the French newspapers. It was about a cocaine affair, in which Mme. de Nogales was mixed up, with a certain Baron, an international specialist in drug traffic. They were both charged at the police court and sentenced respectively, the man to a year and the woman to six months' imprisonment with hard labour. That is the end of the social career of Mme. de Nogales, who now swells the ranks of common adventuresses in search of light loves and doubtful pleasures."

Nicholson shook his head sadly. He murmured:

"Poor woman, she did me an injury, and she has paid for it in another way."

"You are right when you say, poor woman, Freddy, because one should always have pity for women and not mercilessly oppress those who have made us suffer. When we have loved a woman, we have not the right to despise her, however low she may have fallen. But I come now to your future which concerns me, and to our immediate plans."

Roberts told of his visit to the studio and of Mr. Hill. Nicholson was amazed at the providential meeting.

"So after six years I have reappeared to you, under the guise of a Tommy, with woollen stripes . . . there, you have the rise and the fall of military life. 'From captain to corporal or the life of a too sentimental young man.' A fine title for a melodrama."

"Don't talk of melodrama, Freddy! Mr. Hill, your manager, asked my advice regarding the film that you are in. He will have need of our assistance at the embassy of several different favours. that he has hinted to me. I

will grant him all that he wants, in exchange for one: I am going to recommend you as assistant stage-manager. You can learn your job from Mr. Schlesinger. And I know you are an intelligent fellow. I do not see why, in two years, you should not get a much better position in the cinema business."

Roberts' assurance impressed Nicholson. His friend's clear voice magnetized him. It gave him confidence in himself. The courage, the desire to get out of the rut, the will to succeed rose within him, chasing away former hopelessness, sorrowful recollection, hours of drunkenness.

The dirty little room with its bare walls, its poor furniture, the twilight, which darkened by degrees the mean street, was all lit up by an imaginary torch, as hope lights up our march into the future.

Roberts, delighted at having given him renewed hopes, exclaimed happily:

"So, Freddy, I'll take you out to dinner. . . . We have still a good many things to talk about."

"The fact is . . . yes . . . I should be delighted . . . but . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"I've not got a dinner-jacket."

"That's of no consequence, old boy! *Tête-à-tête*, just us two, at my place. . . . Dress as you like. . . . To-morrow I will take you to my tailor's."

Nicholson quickly took off his sweater. He threw his pocket-book on to the table, to put it in his only jacket that he went to take out of the hanging cupboard. Roberts noticed a metallic noise as the worn-out pocket-book fell upon the table. He joked:

"Is it in there that you keep all your dollars, Freddy?"

Nicholson turned away. He did not reply.

He went up to his friend, picked up the pocket-book bulging with papers, and took out a battered piece of lead.

Astonished, Roberts asked :

“ What? A bullet. . . .”

Nicholson looked at his friend. A shadow passed over his bright blue eyes. He concluded simply :

“ It is the one which wounded you when you carried me to the Blockhouse 19. . . . It has never left me.”

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